A ROSE IS A ROSE

JET MYKLES

Loose Id

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Chapter One

Carson's quiet sobbing filled the early morning air. Heedless of the expensive red Chinese silk of his robe, he sat on the dusty floor of his balcony, back wedged against the stucco wall, shoulder against the sturdy wooden posts of the railing. Dawn had just broken over the roof of the apartments across the courtyard from his, washing his haven in weak golden light. Summer was on the wane, and fall had taken root, turning the leaves of some of the trees that shaded him from green to dusky brown. Hugging his folded legs, he rested his forehead on his knees and gave in to the misery that was his life.

"*You better think hard, baby*." Anthony's cruel tone echoed in his head. "*You go on and see how far you get without me*."

Despite his anger, Carson knew the answer to that—he wouldn't get very far without Anthony to support him. His job with the burlesque show would barely cover the rent on his apartment and utilities. He'd become far too accustomed to relying on Anthony for all the little extras like clothing, entertainment, and food. For a glorious six months, Anthony had taken care of him. He knew that. Silly him to think that since the man had done so thus far, he'd want to do so on a more permanent basis. He'd thought that moving in together and becoming a real couple was the next step.

Boy, had he been wrong.

Anthony set him straight and made it clear that they would *not* be living together. Carson had known that Anthony had other lovers at the beginning of their relationship, but he'd honestly thought that he was now the only one. He was mistaken. Anthony might have been spending more time with him in the last few

months, but Carson wasn't his only interest, and Anthony had made that very plain after the show last night. It turned out he was just as stupid and naive as Anthony claimed him to be. He hugged his legs closer and kept his head bowed, ignoring the growl of his empty stomach. At least Anthony could have *fed* him before they broke up. Of course, that had been at three in the morning. Neither of them had been particularly hungry, even after sex.

Sex. Yeah. That had started it. Carson had almost dropped the *L* bomb on Anthony too. Good thing he'd kept his tongue. How could he think he loved someone like that?

"Please."

Startled at the sound of another voice, Carson jerked his head up. Loose, bright crimson hair flew clear of his face, allowing his watery gaze to focus on the man who stood beyond the balcony railing. Since the balcony floor was only a few feet above the garden floor, much of the man was visible even if he was mostly in the shadow of a threadbare tree. A good but plain workingman's face looked back at him. Eddie, the building superintendent. A roughly trimmed black beard and mustache framed a wide mouth underneath deep, sympathetic brown eyes. Brown skin was rough and sun worn, the crinkles at the edges of his eyes making him look a little older than he probably was. A faded and beat-up Los Angeles Dodgers cap shaded his face from the early-morning sun, and a light polyester green-checked shirt was open at the collar to reveal more brown skin and a hint of chest hair.

Now that he had Carson's attention, Eddie cocked his head and raised a hand through the open slats of the balcony railing. Held between a black-nailed finger and thumb was the stem of a gorgeous red rose blossom. The bloom was full, nearly the size of Carson's fist, with layer after layer of scarlet petals that looked for all the world like softest velvet. The heady scent of it wafted into Carson's nostrils as Eddie held it nearer. "Please." His voice was low and soft. Soothing. "Don't cry."

Carson hiccupped, his eyes widening. It was five a.m., not long after the taxi Anthony had paid for dropped Carson off. He'd come outside because indoors had

felt too confining, but he certainly hadn't expected anyone to be up at this hour, let alone to hear him cry. The building's residents tended to keep far more normal hours, working during the day and sleeping during the night in opposition to Carson's usual schedule thanks to the late-night shows.

Fully awake and looking like he was already well into his day, Eddie smiled and held the rose closer. He nodded.

Carson felt the smile curl his lips even though the bottom one trembled. Eddie's smile was infectious, and the rose was beautiful. Hesitantly, he reached out. A half dozen gold bracelets jangled softly about his slim wrist as he accepted the flower from the nice man.

Dark eyes sparkling beneath heavy black brows, Eddie glanced at the blossom, then back at Carson's face. "It matches your hair."

A watery laugh bled from Carson's lips. With his free hand he reached up to tuck away an errant lock of red hair that had fallen forward over his left eye. "Yes. It does." Although the flower's color was natural, while his was from a bottle. He buried his nose in the full bloom to take in the fresh scent. A part of him eased. There was nothing like the smell of roses, and he didn't think he'd ever held a freshly cut one.

Eddie patted Carson's socked foot lightly. "Please. Don't cry."

Carson opened his mouth to spew the dozens of reasons why he had to be miserable, but in the face of Eddie's simple, heartfelt request and with the smell of the rose filling his head, he couldn't do it. Wiping tears from his lashes with one thumb, knowing that last night's mascara must be making ugly tracks down his cheeks, he laughed softly. "Okay." Surprisingly, he meant it. Beyond Eddie's hat, he saw the sun peek through the break in the building across the courtyard, spilling a square of light and warmth over one of the many rosebushes that filled the central area between the buildings. It looked to be a beautiful October day, and just like that, the heartache of the previous night lessened, leaving him weary.

He gave Eddie a genuine smile. "Thank you."

Eddie closed his eyes as he bowed his head. “You’re welcome.” He stepped back and touched two fingers to the bill of his cap. “You have a good day.”

Carson blinked as he watched Eddie turn. He tucked a pair of clippers into the rawhide belt at his waist and ambled down the courtyard’s central aisle to eventually disappear through one of the apartment building’s entrances.

Carson was pleased to discover the smile was still on his face. With a lighter heart, he stood and went inside to succumb to the sleep that was calling him.

Chapter Two

Standing at the balcony railing, Carson beheld a riot of fragrant beauty. “Wow.”

He didn’t know the first thing about gardening, but even his untrained eye could tell that the various plants and trees that filled the courtyard had been carefully placed and well tended. Before today, he had never truly appreciated the beautiful garden dominated by bush after bush of healthy, fragrant roses. He’d seen them when he had checked out the place with Anthony before renting it, but it hadn’t really sunk in. It had only been a few months since then, and his largely nocturnal lifestyle had robbed him of the chance to fully enjoy the garden’s sensual treasures. He promised himself that, from now on, he’d come out here when he got home from work and enjoy the first of the morning with the flowers. That would send him to bed with a clearer head.

There was no sign of Eddie this late in the afternoon. Carson suspected the super was off attending to one of the other tenants. Carson had never had a problem with his place that required the help of the super, but then he basically used his apartment for sleep and as a closet for his clothing, preferring to spend most of his time out and about or at Anthony’s. The apartment was a step up from the room he’d rented from one of his mom’s friends, and he’d been so excited to get it. Funny—it hadn’t seemed odd to him at the time that Anthony insisted he have his own place.

Refusing to dwell on his troubles with Anthony and refreshed by the rich perfume of the roses, Carson ducked back inside. He took a few moments in the bathroom to twist his hair into a tail. Gold hoops dangled from his earlobes, and

only a few of his normally abundant bracelets adorned his wrists, the rest of them in his bag for later. His baggy lavender T-shirt, huge white button-down overshirt, and shapeless jeans could have been worn by either a man or a woman. Without makeup, his slim, soft face looked rather feminine. Also blessed with big topaz blue eyes, he certainly looked younger than his twenty-five years. Some quirk of fate and, he suspected, some Native American genes somewhere had excused him from the curse of facial hair, and he religiously moisturized his creamy skin to keep it soft. He could easily pass for a teenager or, with the right clothing and makeup, a girl, and had done both on many occasions. It was that effeminate beauty and slim, androgynous body that got him attention, and he rather liked it that way.

Satisfied with his looks, he left the bathroom and grabbed his stuffed purple and peach duffel bag. He took a brief moment to brush his fingers over the soft petals of the red rose that stood in a glass of water on his tiny pressboard dining table. Then he headed out. Oddly contemplative, he walked to the bus without turning on his MP3 player. It was such a gorgeous day that he just tilted his head toward the sky to catch the last afternoon rays on his face. The hot southern California dry exposure wasn't good for his skin, but the warmth felt so good that he took the risk. He reached the shelter of the stop right as the bus arrived, and helped an older gentleman with a cane up the steps. He just smiled when the man said, "Thank you, young lady." Two stops in, he gave his seat away to a mother carrying a cranky toddler. Standing with his hand wrapped around a pole, he wiggled his fingers at the chubby little girl, gratified to see her smile. Carson had to grin at his unaccustomed helpfulness and cheer. Not that he thought himself normally callous, but today he didn't mind going a little out of his way. The perfume of the roses filled his head. He'd heard of the concept of "paying it forward" with little kindnesses but had never experienced it for himself.

It was nice. And he didn't even think about Anthony. Much.

Humming softly when he got off the bus, he made the short remaining walk to the Glousen Theatre in the gradually encroaching night. Streetlamps flickered on

overhead, and the neon signs of the liquor and video-rental places sizzled to life to beat away the darkness. Cars whizzed by on the street, stirring up the fallen leaves from the trees stuck into holes in the uneven sidewalk. The Glousen was in an interesting part of town, largely industrial except for two strips of stores, boutique shops, two tiny restaurants, and a bar at the northern corner of a park. The park itself was run-down and kind of dangerous at night, but the theater and businesses did well enough. Carson arrived at the backstage door just after six, sliding inside as the sun gave up completely to the night. Inside was a shrouded hovel with dusty black-painted walls behind the rigging for flying scrims and backdrops. He passed the dark stage to his left and the equipment that looked like medieval torture devices to his right, moving toward the bright rectangle of light that was the door to the back hallway where the theater dressing rooms and offices lay.

"Hey, Lacey," he greeted the assistant stage manager, who stood in the hallway, poring over her clipboard.

The harried woman glanced up, a blank look on her face before the myopic eyes behind her big horn-rimmed glasses recognized him. She smiled and reached out to pet his hair with a hand that also held the stub of a pencil. "Hello, Red." She checked her watch. "You're l—No, you're right on time. Wow."

He gave her something between a grimace and a grin as he passed her by. "I'm not always late."

"Sure you're not." Her voice was not all that convincing, waning as she walked away, again bent over her clipboard. "Anthony must have gone easy on you last night."

Ice flooded his veins. Did she know? He glanced after her, but her back was to him, her mind on the list of things she had to make sure were in place for the eight-o'clock show. Had Anthony talked to anyone already? Although he was one of the producers of the show, he wasn't a regular before curtain. On the sporadic nights that he did show up, he usually arrived around intermission or even toward final curtain. He was far more interested in partying at the club than watching the show

he'd seen countless times. Carson was used to meeting him after the chairs had been whisked away to clear the dance floor. They would party for hours as Anthony enjoyed playing Carson's sugar daddy. He thought it was fun to play benefactor to the central character of the show's most popular number. And why not? He was one of the producers. He *paid* for Carson and had never made any bones about it.

But Carson doubted he'd be partying tonight, even if Anthony showed up. *Especially* if Anthony showed up. Carson frowned as he headed down the dusty hallway. Now that he was here, he wasn't sure he was prepared for the barrage of questions. Maybe he was lucky and Anthony hadn't talked. If not, then he wouldn't either. Well, maybe he'd talk to Chelsea and Henny, but they didn't count. They were his friends. Probably the only really close friends he had these days.

His good mood soured, Carson turned into the common dressing room. He shared the room with the other nineteen members of the chorus, male and female. There were actually two dressing rooms, but the other one served as more of a lounging room. Any newbies to the cast either got used to getting dressed in front of members of the opposite sex, or they found a new job. Besides, in this cast, the members of the opposite sex weren't the most likely to be watching you, at least if you were male. The two headliners had their own dressing rooms down the hall, and there were three other guest dressing rooms for the comedians or guest stars—although many of the guests and comedians ended up getting ready in the common room too, drawn by the eye candy.

Eye candy there was, and lots of it on display. The Glousen sported good old-fashioned burlesque with a lot of bawdy humor, a lot of makeup and skin, and tons of music. Carson loved every tasteless, overdone bit of it. He'd been toying with acting and modeling when he met Anthony early in the year, but it had been Anthony's idea for him to try out for the show. He wasn't a particularly good dancer or singer, but he found out quickly that his role was just to be seen. He was featured in five separate skits spread out during the two-and-a-half-hour show. In each, he was scantily dressed, twice in gorgeous sequined gowns that had been made

specially for him. He hadn't been sure about the show, but he'd come to love it. He no longer wondered whether it had been a good idea to dye his long blond hair a vivid scarlet. Not when his face was featured on the main poster, making him look like the most luscious of sex kittens.

"Carson!" Dressed only in bloomers and a corset, with her pink nipples peeking through the lace along the top, his friend Chelsea sprang from her seat in front of the mirror to hug him close. Strawberry blonde curls bounced in blue and silver ribbons when she held him at arm's length, concern etched on her half-painted face. "I heard."

He hesitated. "Heard what?"

She pursed her lips in pity. "About you and Anthony."

His heart sank. "Who told you?"

"Sweetie, you know you can't keep a secret here. Not one like *that*." She pulled him past a dozen other cast members in various stages of undress and sat him down in his accustomed chair next to hers. Holding his hand, she tossed away a black smudge pencil as she leaned in to murmur so there was less chance they'd be overheard. "Anthony must have told Mark, because Angie came and told us a little while ago."

"Good news travels fast, I guess." Doing his best to ignore any stares that might be pointed his way, he rolled his eyes and unhooked his bag from his shoulder to set it beside him. "I don't think Lacey knows."

Chelsea waved a hand between them. "The bed from the barker skit broke last night. She's been supervising the stagehands all afternoon."

That explained it. Morose, he leaned down to open his bag and extract his makeup kit. If Angie had talked, then the entire cast probably knew by now. He wondered if Vaughn had tackled Anthony yet. He'd always had his eye on him.

"Was it bad?" Chelsea asked, still hovering close.

"Bad enough." He sighed, sitting up and placing the plastic box on the counter in front of the bank of wide, lighted mirrors. "I was stupid."

"How so?"

He shrugged, clicking the kit open to reveal the colorful array of jars and bottles of makeup that would transform his face. "I suggested we move in together."

"Oh, honey." The sympathy in her voice didn't disguise the tone that said he'd been stupid to suggest such a thing.

"I should have known better."

She reached out to squeeze his forearm.

Just then, Vaughn and Paul breezed in. Carson tried not to hear them, but that was nearly impossible even over the top-forties piped into the room. Against his will, he met Vaughn's vivid blue eyes. Vaughn smiled. Carson's heart shrank as the man headed his way.

Vaughn's smile turned upside down before he reached Carson, and he lifted one limp-wristed hand to his chest in mock sympathy. "Oh, Carson, baby. I'm *so* sorry to hear about you and Anthony." His voice cut over the music and the babble of the other cast members, ensuring that he and Carson had everyone's attention.

Carson forced himself to smile at the bitch. As lead dancer, Vaughn was graceful as a swan and just as beautiful. But inside beat the heart of a harpy with a vicious tongue often directed at Carson since Vaughn had set his sights on Anthony. "Thank you."

Vaughn clucked his tongue, clearly not done with Carson yet. "And for him to up and leave the country like that. So soon."

Carson couldn't keep the confusion from his face.

Vaughn pounced, plucked eyebrows soaring toward his hairline. "Didn't you know? He left this morning for Martinique."

Martinique? How could Vaughn know that? Anthony and Carson had spoken often about going there. "And how did you find this out?"

A snide smile curled one side of Vaughn's mouth. "He took my friend Donald with him."

Donald. Carson vaguely knew him. He wasn't in the show, but he was a cute little wannabe who often came to the club. Hiding his misery as best he could, Carson glared at Vaughn. "Too bad he couldn't take you, eh?"

That dimmed some of Vaughn's glee, but he'd evidently decided that he was happy Carson couldn't go. "I couldn't very well leave the show." With that, he was done with Carson. With a dramatic wave of his arm, he swept away to the other side of the room.

Martinique. That was Carson's idea. Carson had left his research about it on Anthony's computer. They had made tentative plans to go in the spring when Anthony could arrange for Carson to be gone from the show for a few weeks. It was a deliberate slap in the face for Anthony to go there now with someone else just a few scant hours after breaking up with Carson.

A different set of arms came to hug him from behind, enclosing him in a light cloud of orchid perfume. Meeting his gaze in the mirror, Henny laid her unmade cheek on the top of his head, her arms draped over his shoulders, hands dangling like a pendant in front of his chest. She batted fake eyelashes at him, her bright red lips in an exaggerated pout. "You don't need that nasty man anyway. I'll take care of you, honey."

As she had to have intended, he laughed. It was empty and forced, but it was a laugh. He gave her hands an affectionate squeeze. "Thank you, my love, but you're missing one essential element that I like to have on my lovers."

"What? A penis? Damn, honey, haven't you ever heard of strap-ons?" She thrust her hips at the back of his chair for emphasis. "Always hard."

With a more authentic laugh, he tilted his head back to lay it on her shoulder, enough that he could nuzzle her jaw. "You're too good to me. Can I really be your boy toy?"

She gave him a quick kiss on the lips. “Anytime.” Then she pressed her cheek to his with a sigh. “Though I don’t make enough to keep you like you’re used to.”

He sighed. It wasn’t any secret that he’d benefited greatly from Anthony’s money. A glance at the pricey gold encircling his wrists showed just a fraction of the baubles he’d received from the man. “What am I going to do?”

Henny and Chelsea had no words for him, only sympathetic looks.

Chapter Three

If Carson closed his eyes, the warmth of the afternoon sun on his face and the full floral scent surrounding him could let him forget anything and everything. He didn't know how long he'd been sitting in the garden, but it had to have been over an hour. The initial shade from the tall rosebush had receded, allowing the warmth of the sun to bathe him. That was California for you. The past few days had been on the cool side, but today the heat could have been summer. Carson welcomed the change as a slight diversion. He needed that—*any* diversion. The past few days at work had been tedious at best and excruciatingly embarrassing at worst. Absolutely *everyone* knew about him and Anthony, and the reactions varied from pity to gloating satisfaction. He'd discovered a good handful of people who had befriended him only because of his connection to Anthony. Now they'd hardly give him the time of day. If it weren't for Chelsea and Henny, life at the Glousen would have been painfully lonely for Carson. But today he'd roused himself early and actually stepped outside. He found the garden refreshingly different and was loath to leave it.

Boots scuffing the stones of the paved walkway intruded on his reverie. He opened his eyes, a smile on his face, suspecting he knew who the newcomer was. When a shadow with a baseball cap loomed on the path, his suspicion was confirmed. "Your garden is beautiful."

Eddie's bulk blocked the way to the little cul-de-sac where Carson sat on his bench. The cap shaded most of Eddie's face, but the sun caressed the deep brown of his muscular arms beyond the short sleeves of his navy T-shirt, the heat coating them with a thin layer of sweat to mingle with sparse dark hair. Loose, faded black

jeans were paint spattered, as were his thick workman's boots, the similar pattern suggesting that he might have just come from painting.

"I'm sorry to interrupt." So deep, his voice. So calm. Like he had all the time in the world to say what he would say, even if that wasn't often much.

Arms hugging one leg to his chest, Carson shook the head he had balanced on his knee, still smiling. "You haven't. I'm sorry if *I've* interrupted. Do you need me to go?"

"No. I can come back later."

"No." Lowering his leg to the ground, he sat up and gave Eddie his warmest smile, far too pleased with the man who'd supplied his morning's sanctuary. "Please don't go."

Their gazes locked, and Carson saw it. That look. He'd seen it so many times. That look in a man's eyes that told you he found you attractive, distracting. The look that said the sight of you did things to him that made him want to do things to you. Not all the men who wore that look were happy about it, of course. Plenty of men hated the fact that they found another man attractive, no matter how effeminate he looked. Plenty more initially thought he was a woman, then *really* took offense when they found out he wasn't. Dressed in plain jeans and a snug crimson T-shirt, Carson looked a little more masculine than usual. The shirt made it clear that he had no breasts, and the jeans made it clear that his hips were quite slim. Okay, he had sparkly crimson polish on his finger- and toenails, but that was a minor detail. There was nothing he could do about the feminine curves of his face, but he wore no makeup, and the scarlet locks of his hair were pulled back in a haphazard tail. It was his plain look, as plain as he got. He watched Eddie's eyes as they dropped to take in the details, but when they returned to his face, the open admiration remained.

Oh good. Too many promising friendships had died when men found out he was male. "I wanted to thank you for the other morning," Carson said, gripping the

edge of the bench to either side of his knees and leaning forward a little. "The rose. That was nice of you."

Eddie nodded, taking a step closer. "You're welcome. Are you…better?"

Carson chuckled softly, crossing his ankles. He'd discarded his flip-flops beside the bench, and now the soles of his narrow feet were dusty. But he didn't mind. He liked the warmth of the thick, smooth paving stones. "Yes. And no." He kept watching Eddie's face. "My boyfriend broke up with me."

No judgment. No disgust. Just compassion. "I'm sorry."

"Thank you."

Eddie turned, pulling a pair of clippers from his belt.

Seeing the clippers descend on the stem of a helpless flower, Carson held out a hand. "Wait, Eddie."

He didn't. Eddie clipped a full red bloom from one of the bushes. Hooking the clippers back on his belt, he quickly and efficiently thumbed away the thorns from the stem and pulled off a dying leaf. Taking that one last step that brought him to Carson's side, he held out the flower. "Here."

"Oh, Eddie, you didn't have to do that." Carson took the flower anyway. He'd been admiring that particular bush, the one that sat underneath his balcony, because of the hue of the blooms. Deep, deep red with a center that was just a bit of a softer blush. The scent was fresh and rich, so powerful, so calming.

"Roses are meant to be enjoyed," Eddie said, attention on another stem of the bush. The clippers came to his hand again, and he clipped off a wilting bloom while he spoke. "If they stay on the bush, they'll eventually wither and die, same as if they're cut. This way, you can enjoy it." He cut a few brown stems, holding them in his hand regardless of the thorns.

Carson smiled, brushing the soft petals against his lips as he watched the man's hands. Big, dirty, cracked. Not the kind of hands he'd think of touching, but

they looked so sure and capable that he was fascinated. "You look like you know what you're doing."

Eddie tossed the clippings just off the path behind him, creating a small pile that he continued to add to. "My mom taught me to care for roses when I was a little boy. This garden has been my safe place for most of my life."

"How long have you and your mom owned the building?"

"She's had it longer'n I've been alive. I'm thirty."

Carson lowered his gaze to the flower. *Same age as Anthony*. The two men were polar opposites, though. Stylish to the bone, Anthony spent lots of money to look good and stay young. Although his demeanor suggested his true age, those who didn't know him might guess he was in his midtwenties. With his sun-worn skin that he certainly didn't treat with the same expensive products as Anthony, Eddie looked older. Not that he didn't wear it well. There was something solid and comforting about Eddie that Anthony would never have. Eddie looked bigger, stronger, despite the many hours Anthony spent honing his physique in the gym. Eddie certainly looked less sculpted. Anthony's manicurist would die at the sight of Eddie's hands, the fingertips brown and cracked and the nails black under the edges. Anthony's stylist would faint dead away to see the uneven cut of the shorn black hair that peeped from under the baseball cap, and she probably would have insisted that the mustache and beard went away.

Carson smiled at his own musings. "You've lived here all your life?"

Eddie moved to a different bush, squatting down so he could get closer to the root. "Yep."

"That must be nice. I've never lived in one place longer than a year or so."

"What did your parents do?"

"My mother was an actress-slash-model. Or was before she met Gerard. She now lives in France at his villa."

Eddie's knees lowered to the pavement. He rested his hands on his thighs and looked up at Carson. "That's nice."

"I suppose." Carson wondered if his beard was as soft as it looked. "I'm not allowed to visit."

"Why not?"

"Gerard doesn't like me." He held out his hands and sat up to indicate his body. "He doesn't approve of the girly package."

Eddie frowned. "He doesn't like the way you look?"

"Look. Act. Live. He thinks boys should be boys." Carson shrugged, hunching back down and putting his rose back to his nose. He could almost hear his mother's command to sit up and took perverse delight in disobeying.

"I don't understand."

Carson blinked, then stared at Eddie. "Don't understand what?"

"How could he not like you for being who you are?"

Carson's manicured eyebrows shot up in shock. He couldn't help a laugh. "Oh, Eddie, you're precious. I only *wish* more people would think like you."

Eddie took that in stride with a shrug, then bent over some task that involved prodding the dark soil around the root of the bush. "I don't understand people much. Flowers, animals, appliances—they all make sense. But people…" He shook his head.

Carson's cheeks stretched with his smile. "What a lovely man you are." He sighed before he could stop himself.

Eddie jerked up, a flush darkening the column of his neck. "Me? No. *You're* the beautiful one."

"You say the sweetest things." He shouldn't flirt. It wasn't nice to tease. But he couldn't help it. The flush was too precious.

Eddie shook his head. "No." He cleared his throat, keeping his gaze on the dark soil.

They were silent for long moments, Carson watching languidly as Eddie rose from his knees to start clipping at bushes again.

But then Carson's stomach growled, and his pleasant bubble burst. His belly wanted food that he didn't have. He sighed. "I should go." He pushed his flip-flops into position with his toes. "I need to figure out what I'm going to eat before work."

"I, uh…" When Carson looked up, Eddie was standing. He pulled the cap from his head, then pushed dirty fingers through the cropped strands of sweaty, matted black hair beneath before yanking the cap back on. "I was, uh, going to heat up some leftover spaghetti for lunch. There's plenty for two. If you want."

Carson's belly gurgled again, but he bit his lip. His first instinct was to jump at the chance. Spaghetti wasn't part of his usual diet, but today he was just hungry. Still, he demurred. "I couldn't."

"It's no trouble. I always make enough to eat for a few days. It's nothing special, but…it's good."

Carson stood. Eddie was a little taller than Anthony, which made him almost a foot taller than Carson. Carson felt positively fragile standing in front of him.

He liked it.

Stop that.

"If you're sure."

Eddie's smile confirmed that he was, full of all of the warmth of his garden. "I am."

Carson couldn't help but return that smile. "Then I'd be grateful."

Chapter Four

Carson had to smile as he followed Eddie into the ground-floor apartment directly across the courtyard from his. He hadn't known that the balcony on the other side of the rose garden from his was the super's, but it made sense. The two balconies had the best view of the flowers, and surely Eddie liked to admire his haven.

Given Eddie's workman's look and job, Carson expected a dark, haphazard bachelor's apartment with a mess no less than his own, if composed of different ingredients. His mess consisted mostly of clothing, plastic water bottles, and costume accessories. He'd expected Eddie's to be pizza boxes and tools. He was wrong. Eddie's apartment, with a layout the mirror image of Carson's, was not only neat as a pin; it was bright and sunny. The walls were painted the same white, but the accents were all golden pine or painted green instead of more white. A narrow strip of wallpaper followed the ceiling all around the main room and the attached kitchen, festooned with crawling rose vines sporting deep red and pastel pink blossoms. Roses were the theme of the embroidered throw tossed over the back of the brown microsuede couch as well as the throw pillows and the seats of the chairs that sat around a round four-seater pine dining table. Carson wouldn't have believed that a man lived there at all except for the forty-two-inch flat-screen television, the infinitely comfortable and well-used couch, and the neatly stacked toolboxes off in one corner.

"Do you live here by yourself?"

"Yes."

A glance at a lamp and the cabinet underneath showed not a trace of dust. “Wow. Do you have a housekeeper?”

Eddie draped his tool belt over the boxes in the corner, then gave Carson a quizzical look. “No. Why?”

“I’ve never known a man this neat.”

“Oh.” Eddie turned toward the kitchen. “My mother used to live here, and she had emphysema. I just got used to keeping it clean.”

Carson followed but stopped at the end of the counter that marked the switch from main room to kitchen. This room was tidy and shiny. The appliances showed wear and tear from age, but they were in good shape. They were pretty much the same as in Carson’s apartment, but he got the impression they were older. Here, too, most accents featured roses, including the towels and oven mitts that hung on the side of one of the cabinets.

“Where’s your mother now?”

“In a home about fifteen minutes from here.” Eddie bent over the sink and applied a healthy dose of liquid soap to his hands before turning on the faucet. “She’s sharp as a tack, but she doesn’t get around so good anymore. They can take better care of her there.”

Carson had a feeling Eddie did as best as he could to care for his mother, just judging from his tone. Comforted, Carson leaned his chest toward the forearms he rested on the counter as he watched Eddie rip a paper towel from a roll above the sink and dry his hands. Sure movements. He was at home in his own kitchen. “How long has she been there?”

“Three years. She really likes it. She’s got lots of friends, like she used to when she was running this place.”

“Oh?”

“Oh yeah. When I was growing up, there was a family in every one of these units, and the moms were all friends. I grew up with tons of kids around.”

Carson could hardly imagine it. True, he came and went at odd hours, but he could barely remember what any of his neighbors looked like, having rarely seen them. The building was very quiet, one of the reasons Anthony had picked it for him, so he could sleep during the day. “It’s really changed.”

“It has.” Eddie seemed a little sad about that as he dried his hands. “Lots of things have changed. Haven’t really been the same since my dad died.”

“When was that?”

Eddie didn’t look at Carson as he turned to open the refrigerator. “I was eighteen.”

“I’m sorry.”

Eddie shrugged, emerging with two plastic containers, one with red sauce and one with pasta, the former much larger than the latter. He frowned at the second. “Not sure there’s enough pasta for two.” He put that container back. “I’ll make some fresh.”

Carson stood back. “No, it’s okay. You don’t have to bother.”

But Eddie was already at the cabinet, pulling out a box of pasta. “It’s not a bother. I’d have to do it for tonight anyway.” He gestured with the sauce before setting it down. “I’ve got sauce for days.” Then he blinked and finally looked at Carson. “You don’t mind waiting, do you? Won’t take long.” It was an entreaty. Eddie clearly wanted him to stay.

Carson’s belly chose that moment to growl again. Loudly. He jerked, embarrassed. Then Eddie melted into a chuckle, and Carson had to join him. “Okay.”

As Eddie started the water, Carson turned to again look at the main room. From this angle, he could see down the short hallway through the open bathroom door at the end. Unlike the white walls of his own bathroom, this one was painted a cheery yellow that would have horrified his mother. But then, the entire apartment—indeed, the entire *building*—would have horrified Katherine. She was not the type to embroider or even accessorize with a floral motif. Even before she’d

had money, her idea of decoration was vivid jewel tones and sharp, crisp lines. The only time she enjoyed flowers was in bouquets sent to her by fawning admirers.

Carson wandered to the sliding glass door to look out at the garden. “You said your mom taught you gardening. Did she teach you to cook too?”

“Yep. Though that’s just in the years when she was sick. I don’t really cook anything fancy.”

Carson nodded absently, wondering what it would be like to have a mother who needed you. Katherine had certainly never needed him. Oh, she loved him, in her way. But he also had no doubt that having a child to cart around had been a burden to the lovely young actress. Not many men wanted to take on that responsibility, and caring for a child wasn’t conducive to her schedule. She’d done her best, he knew, but instead of teaching him to cook or to garden, she’d taught him makeup and costume tricks and, inadvertently, how to snag a man. Between Katherine and her outspoken friends, Carson had learned quite a bit about men far before he even knew he was interested in them himself. Katherine had not been upset or surprised to find out he was gay.

A pot clattered onto the stove as Carson wandered to the side of the couch and finally saw on the table before it evidence that a man might live here. The remote control sat on top of the sports section of the newspaper, folded to display lists of football statistics. Beside it were the TV listings under an open box of crackers. Two football magazines lay toward the other end of the table. Sports. That’s what *normal* boys were into. Even Anthony had been something of a basketball fan. While Carson got the fascination with sweaty bodies in action, the strategy and involvement of sports had never appealed to him.

“Can I get you something to drink?”

Turning back to the kitchen, Carson found Eddie watching him. He was kind of handsome, really, in a thick, rugged way. It made Carson wonder what those solid muscles felt like. He had never really gone for the ordinary guy type, though,

preferring well-dressed, polished, and, yes, wealthy men. But Eddie had a way about him that made Carson smile. “Water’s fine.”

“You sure? I’ve got lemonade and pop. Or beer.” He sounded doubtful on the last offering.

Amused, Carson shook his head. The spaghetti would surely contain far more calories than he usually consumed in one setting. He didn’t need to add a sweetened drink on top of that.

Eddie opened a cabinet and took out two glasses. “Ice?”

“Please.” Carson approached the kitchen again. “Can I help?” He didn’t know what he could do, as boiling water and using the microwave were the extent of his culinary capabilities, but he felt as though he should offer.

“No, thanks. There’s not much to do.” Eddie got ice from the freezer, then filled the glass from a filtered spigot in the refrigerator.

Carson bit his lip over asking if Eddie had bottled water. Of course he didn’t. At least it was filtered. He accepted the glass from across the counter and smiled as he sipped. Eddie fidgeted while the water boiled, clearly something on his mind that he didn’t want to say.

Carson took a guess at what it was. “It must be nice to have regular interests.” He set his glass on the counter between his forearms. “I’m sure you can guess I’ve never been what you could consider *normal*.”

Eddie carefully took the bait. “Did you…travel a lot?”

“Some. We spent most of our time in New York, but then when I was sixteen, Katherine got it in her head that she wanted to be a movie star, so we had to come to Hollywood.”

“Katherine?”

“My mother. She always thought that being called Mom made her look old.”

Eddie checked the water. “Do you have any brothers or sisters?”

"Dear God, no. At least, not that I know of. I suppose the sperm donor might have kids somewhere."

"Your mom went to one of those sperm banks?"

Carson laughed. "Oh no. She got knocked up the old-fashioned way. But the guy who did it was never interested in sticking around. I met him once when I was six." Carson shook his head. "That was more than either of us needed. He was an actor too. Very handsome." Carson drew his finger down the condensation on his glass. "No, I grew up in a world of women. Dressing rooms, photo shoots, and hotel rooms. It was a good thing Katherine was stunning, so when the parts weren't coming in, she always managed to find work as a model or…something." Carson had never bothered to try and track the many different "uncles" he'd had growing up nor questioned their presence in his mother's bedroom. They usually bought him nice things, and he was glad when they treated her well. She often had pretty good taste.

If Eddie caught Carson's meaning, he didn't pry. He reached into another cabinet and took out two plates.

Might as well put it out there. Eddie was probably wondering anyway. "People have mistaken me for a girl all my life."

That got him a glance over Eddie's broad shoulder. "Really?"

Carson laughed. "Well, look at me." He stepped back from the counter and cocked a hip in a sassy pose. It wasn't quite as effective in just a T-shirt and jeans, but it would do. "Don't tell me you didn't think I was a girl when you first saw me."

Eddie tried to duck his head away as he stuck the plastic bin with the sauce in the microwave, but Carson saw the confirmation on his face.

"It's okay. Really." He returned to lean on the counter. "I'll tell you the truth—I feel like a girl sometimes."

That got Eddie's attention. "Really?"

"Really. Obviously there are physical differences." He gave Eddie a sly look just to make him blush. It worked. "But I've never really *thought* like a guy. I like

pretty clothes and flowers." He grinned. "And dresses. Wasn't a shocker when I turned out gay."

Eddie dumped the whole packet of spaghetti into the boiling water. "Not all gay men are like that."

Carson's eyebrows shot up, but Eddie, busy stirring the pasta, didn't see it. "No." *And how many gay men do you know*? "But I am."

Eddie nodded, and a silence fell. Carson couldn't tell what Eddie was thinking, and his own thoughts were rolling slowly in his head. What, exactly, did Eddie know of gay men? He certainly seemed like a typical guy. There wasn't even a blip on Carson's gaydar. But he was pretty comfortable, and *he* was the one who'd given Carson the rose. Carson had thought it was just a kind gesture, but could it be more?

"So," he started brightly as Eddie punched numbers on the microwave to get it going, "enough about me. What about you? Why hasn't some lovely young woman nabbed you?"

Eddie smiled, flushing only a little. "I don't get out much."

Not a denial. "But you are looking for Mrs. Right, aren't you? Provide your mom with the requisite grandchildren?" He figured it was better to find out the girl situation rather than ask outright if Eddie was gay.

Eddie's smile dimmed only a little, but his eyes got a far-away look. "I've dated some. Got set up by some of my mom's friends. There's also this bar I go to sometimes to watch games. There are some nice girls there." He shook his head. "Never anyone special." A slight frown suggested he might want to say more, but he didn't.

Confirmation. Carson was a bit surprised to feel disappointment. Again, Eddie wasn't his type. It wasn't like anything could have happened between them.

"Well maybe I need to set you up with some of my girlfriends." He laughed. "There are a few I know who'd just love a guy like you."

Eddie stirred the pasta, his profile to Carson. "Like me?"

"Big. Strong. Dependable. Bearded. I've got one girlfriend who's just *crazy* for beards."

Did Eddie realize he reached up to scratch said beard? Didn't seem like it. "You're in some type of show, right? A dancer?"

"Kind of, but not really. It's a burlesque show. We do a lot of different things. I'm mainly a showpiece."

"Huh?"

Carson grinned. "I dress up in glittery costumes and prance around the stage while people sing about me."

Eddie chuckled as he grabbed a plastic strainer from the dish drainer and set it in the sink. "I'd like to see that. Sometime. If that'd be okay with you."

Carson convinced himself that his heart swelled like that whenever anyone wanted to see him perform. "Of course! I could get you a ticket for next week, if you like. Or two. You could pick up one of those girls for a date."

Eddie tested the pasta, then turned off the flame. "Just me, I think." Using two of the oven mitts, he carried the hot pot to the sink and dumped out the pasta in one steaming rush. After putting the pot back on the stove, he gave Carson a winning smile. "I'd like to enjoy the show by myself first."

Carson didn't know what to make of that, so he just smiled back.

Chapter Five

Chelsea blinked over the small table at Carson. “Where *is* Martinique?”

Carson pressed his lips into an unhappy line before he answered. “It’s in the Caribbean. It’s supposed to be gorgeous.”

“And he was going to take you?”

“We’d talked about it.”

“That bastard. I’m sorry.” She patted his arm.

They’d just endured another goading session from Vaughn, who wanted to assure Carson that Anthony was still out of the country with his new boy toy.

To make matters worse, after a week without Anthony, Carson was discovering just how dependent he’d become on the man. It was a rude awakening to have a nearly empty kitchen and a strapped bank account. He’d even had to call the bank instead of checking online, because the only computers he’d had access to had been Anthony’s. Payday wasn’t until next week, and he wasn’t at all sure how he was going to manage. He stared at the empty plate before him, thankful that the Glousen had a kitchen and it was part of their contract that the performers were fed for rehearsals. But how was he going to make it through the weekend?

They sat at one of the tables just in front of the stage. The house lights were on, and the mostly empty theater/nightclub was a bit chilly. On the second Monday of every month—Monday being the Glousen’s dark night—the entire cast met with Thodd, the director and owner of the Glousen, to find out which skits would be retiring and what new was going into the show. The most popular skits—like Carson’s—stayed running, but the smaller sketches with guest actors or the comedians changed all the time. Today only the dancers and bit players needed to

be present, as the comedians' sets would be fit in between whatever numbers Thodd thought appropriate.

"All right, people, listen up."

The deep thunder of Thodd's voice filled the room. Weighing over three hundred pounds, Thodd dropped himself into the sturdy chair set center stage for him. Carson didn't know how all burlesque shows worked, but this one had a director that the cast fondly referred to as Hitler. Thodd decided the numbers, he hired the cast and comedians, he hired the choreographers, and he decided who did what. Lacey scurried behind him with his glass of scotch and two bags of chips handy, as well as her ever-present clipboard. Mark, the stage manager, sat at a table on the floor to stage right, bent over his iPad. Carson always wondered if he was ever as busy as he claimed to be, or if he was playing games on his toy.

"Quite a few changes this month," Thodd announced, consulting a piece of paper he held before him as he donned his reading glasses. "With Monique leaving us and Greggory's absence, we need three new numbers, and we need them quick. I've discussed them with Ron, and he's going to need the following people…"

Carson listened to the changes, surprised to hear his name in the list for two of the three new numbers. Since he was only an adequate dancer and not much of an actor, to date he was only in the one set of numbers and had never expected to be in any others. He showed up for rehearsals because it was a job obligation and because occasionally they had to break in a new dancer for the established numbers. He exchanged confused looks with Chelsea, but she just shrugged. As Thodd went on, Carson started to get a sick feeling he knew why.

"And last, as you may have realized, I've listed off too many numbers." Thodd set down his list as he removed his glasses. "That's because we're going to pull the *Carmine* number as of the end of this month."

Carson's heart sank. *Carmine* was his featured number. *Carmine* was him, the reason he'd grown and dyed his hair. The reason he was in the show. It had been the Glousen's signature sketch since before he'd come on board. He'd inherited the

role from another man when Peter's boyish charms had begun to look too obvious. The whole point behind the sketch was that no one was sure if he was male or female. It was such a huge number that it was played in three parts: one at the beginning of the show, one just before intermission, then another at the very end.

He felt the weight of most of the room's attention on him but couldn't tear his gaze from Thodd. Maybe he'd heard wrong? But Thodd just gave him a casual look and said nothing, folding his hands over his ample belly.

"One of Ron's new numbers will be the new closer." Although he spoke for the room, Carson got the impression Thodd was speaking directly to him. "Any questions?"

Yes. Why? It was on Carson's lips, but the look in Thodd's eyes kept him silent. He suspected he knew why.

"No? Good." With a grunt, Thodd heaved himself from his chair. "That'll be all."

"All right, y'all," Ron called, his Southern twang sailing over the thunder of scraping chairs and the hiss of anxious whispers. "Gather round, and we'll see about scheduling some rehearsal time. We need to get goin' on this quick."

"Come on." Chelsea grabbed Carson's hand as she stood.

He only looked at her, his mouth slightly open.

She nodded. "I know. But there's nothing you can do about it now." She tugged his hand. "Come on."

He let himself be led to the group surrounding the choreographer. Unlike Thodd, who preferred to be viewed from the stage, Ron had everyone stand close around. As he was passing out scheduling sheets, he paused in front of Carson. The look in his brown eyes was sympathetic but brief; then he moved on past Carson as he continued to issue orders. Carson listened with half an ear as he learned the gist of the new numbers—the new numbers that didn't feature an androgynous, scarlet-haired cutie.

It was official. His life had now completely turned upside down. Anthony must have asked them to do this. There was no other reason to cut the number. Carson fought to breathe over the growing lump in his throat. He shouldn't scream. Really, he shouldn't. But oh how he wanted to.

After they were done setting times, the dancers milled about toward the stage. Ron, however, waved him to the side. "Carson, sweetie, I need to talk to you."

Carson met Ron's eyes and knew it was trouble. He threw a murderous look toward the back of the club, where Thodd sat at the bar, talking on the phone, but he followed Ron to a side booth where they could have some modicum of privacy.

As gay as the day is long, Ron was a tall, slinky ballroom dancer with a body Carson would kill for. Of anyone involved with the show, Carson had the most respect for Ron, both as a person and as a performer. It figured, then, that Ron had been appointed to talk to him.

Ron took his hand and drew him close behind the booth's table. The house lights weren't as bright in that area, so it was a little more private. "I know you're upset—"

"You think?"

Ron nodded, his focus on their hands and not on Carson's face. "I know, sweetie. I know. But you have to know that Thodd's been wanting to ditch that number for months."

Carson's eyes went wide. His heart skipped a beat. "What?"

"You didn't know." Ron sighed and sat back, letting their hands drift apart until their fingertips barely overlapped on the polished surface. "It's true. He's wanted to take *Carmine* from the show for a while."

"Why hasn't he?"

Finally Ron's eyes met his. "Why do you think?"

Carson didn't even have to guess. "Anthony."

Ron nodded to confirm.

“And Anthony said no because of me?”

“I can only assume so.”

Now Carson slumped back in the shiny green upholstery. “Damn it. Is that why Thodd wanted to ditch the number?”

“I don’t know about that.” But the way Ron’s gaze dipped away suggested that Carson had hit the nail on the head.

“Well. Fuck.” That lump was back in his throat and growing.

“Now you listen here.” Ron sat forward again, folding his hands on the table. “I know you don’t have any prior experience, but we’ll make the most of these new numbers. You’ll be *fine* if you do what I say. All right, sweetie?” He reached up to smooth a lock of Carson’s hair back behind his ear.

Carson forced a smile. Ron was being extremely nice. Carson had learned enough during his time with the show to know that he wasn’t as driven or as talented as the other performers. By all rights, he shouldn’t be in the show without *Carmine*. But what could he do? He needed the job. He had nowhere else to go. “Thanks. You’re too good to me.”

Ron leaned over to press a kiss to Carson’s temple. “That I am.” He wound an arm around Carson’s neck to give him an extra squeeze. “Are you…okay? You need anything?”

Carson’s eyes burned at the mere fact that Ron would ask. They were far from bosom buddies, and he was touched that Ron would even begin to care. He would seriously consider seeing if Ron wanted to hook up with him, but he happened to know that Ron had a devoted life partner to whom he would be married if it were legal in California. “No.” He squeezed the man’s hand. “But thank you.”

“Not a bit. Not a bit.” Carson got another quick kiss on the cheek. “Now scoot. I need a breather before we start rehearsing.”

Carson rose from the booth and took himself across the room toward the hall that led to the bathrooms. He knew Chelsea and Henny—among others—were

watching him, but he went right past them. He felt the chilly bump in his chest and knew he had to be alone, if only for a few minutes. He slipped into the bathroom and locked the main door. If anyone else had to go, tough shit. He didn't even move away from the door after the lock clicked, just leaned his forehead against the ugly green condom advertisement and let the tears flow.

Chapter Six

The scent of the rose filled Carson's head and made him feel just a touch better. Why had it taken him so long to discover the healing powers of roses?

He stood in Eddie's garden, fingers delicately cradling a crimson bloom to angle it so he could bury his nose in soft petals. The gray predawn light filled the chilly air around him. He disregarded the chill that penetrated the thin silk of his robe, concentrating on the scent, needing it to fill him with some warmth after a sleepless, worrisome night.

He shouldn't have been surprised to hear the soft trod of boots, but he was. Startled, he glanced over his shoulder to find Eddie on the path, wearing jeans and an untucked white T-shirt. The fact that he was hatless and the laces of his boots trailed the path told Carson that he'd dressed in a hurry. Concern drew heavy brows down about the bridge of his nose as he approached Carson. "Are you okay?" His voice was soft, a whisper in the haze.

Carson lifted a hand to brush a stray tear from his cheek. Most of the tears had dried up hours ago, but another trickled through now and again. "Oh sure." He gave a watery laugh, covering his eyes with his hand. "You always seem to find me crying."

Eddie was beside him, his bulk shading Carson from the growing light. He laid a hand lightly on Carson's shoulder. "Is there anything I can do?"

Without warning, a sob burst from Carson's chest. Mortified, he clutched the robe over his heart. Eddie's presence, so big and strong, brought back the helplessness that had ridden him since he'd left rehearsal, and invited the waterworks back.

Warmth encompassed him as muscular arms wrapped around his shoulders and pulled him against a solid chest. His nose pressed the T-shirt, inhaling detergent and the musky, earthy scent of Eddie's skin. Desperate, he pulled the scent into his lungs, greedily sucking in the offered comfort. He shoved his arms around Eddie's torso, a little overwhelmed when he found his fingertips could barely touch. Eddie's bearded chin rested atop his head as surprisingly gentle hands stroked his back. He felt so small, so safe. Even if he knew it wasn't real, that Eddie couldn't shield him from the world, he let himself believe it for a few precious moments.

Finally, though, he hiccupped and pulled back. Embarrassed, he kept his face tilted down, staring at the tuft of dark hair revealed by the V of Eddie's T-shirt. "That's enough of that," he said, trying to make light of what had just happened.

Eddie wasn't buying it. His hands slid up Carson's sides to his shoulders. He made two attempts to speak, his Adam's apple working under stubbled skin. "Have you had breakfast?"

Carson startled, not expecting the topic. A small laugh escaped him as he peeked up. Eddie's brows were drawn with worry.

"Breakfast?"

"I was…I was going to the kitchen when I saw you."

"You didn't have to come out here." *But I'm glad you did*. Crying on someone else's shoulder helped much more than crying into his pillow.

"Are you hungry?"

Carson drew one hand up between them and thumped his fist against the solid wall of Eddie's chest. "You do not have to feed me whenever you find me in your garden."

Clearly, Eddie hadn't seen the repetition. He opened his mouth, closed it, then smiled. "But I've got food."

Carson sighed and pulled another few inches away. Far enough that Eddie's hands fell away, although they did so slowly. Carson bunched up his robe at his collarbone. He'd been fine before, but the air seemed colder now outside Eddie's embrace. "That's nice of you, but—"

"It's no trouble. I'd like the company." Eddie cocked his head to the side and smiled. "Eggs and bacon."

"God." Carson's belly threatened to rumble. Neither eggs nor bacon were in his diet, and it'd been days since he'd exercised outside of rehearsal and performance. He really should watch what he ate. But then, who knew when he'd be able to afford food again? Besides, he'd been eating the appetizers from the Glousen. One fattening breakfast wouldn't hurt any more.

And he did *so* miss the taste of bacon.

"Okay. But"—he held up a finger—"you have to promise me that you won't insist on feeding me each time we talk. It's not right when I can't pay you back."

Eddie's smile grew, showing teeth within the shadowy ring of his beard. "You pay me back with your company. I miss eating with someone."

So Carson found himself back in Eddie's apartment, this time seated at the bar stool that sat on the other side of the counter from the kitchen. Again he watched Eddie's sure movements in the kitchen as he laid bacon strips in a cast-iron skillet. They didn't talk much while Eddie cooked. The television was on to the morning news, filling the air with noise. Carson used the time to calm down, letting himself get comfortable with the very normal atmosphere. Even the mornings he'd spent with Anthony had never been like this. Anthony didn't cook, so breakfast was cereal, an energy drink, or something he had brought in. But then, with Anthony, "breakfast" was likely to happen somewhere around noon.

Not until they were seated on stools to either side of the counter with full plates in front of them did Eddie broach the subject. "Can I ask what's wrong?"

Carson froze, a fork full of fluffy, light mushroom omelet halfway to his mouth.

"If you don't want to talk about it, I understand," Eddie said, eyes focused on Carson's shoulder. "But if you *do*…I'm happy to listen."

Genuine. That was it. Eddie was more genuine than anyone Carson knew. It was very likely that which made Carson *want* to tell him. "My life is a mess." He chewed and swallowed his forkful before he went on. "I knew it was a mess, but I didn't know how much until I lost Anthony." Another bite as he decided how to describe the situation. "He was…*is* what you'd call 'rich,' and he used to take care of me. Good care. I didn't realize how much I'd come to depend on him until now. And the bastard went to Martinique without me." He pounded a fist on the counter. "Martinique was *my* idea, dammit."

"Martinique?"

Carson sighed, moving bits of food around his plate with the tines of his fork. "It's in the Caribbean. It's supposed to be gorgeous, and he was going to take me. Sometime. And last week he just up and went. He took some other boy toy with him. Just to spite me."

"He took someone else?"

"That's what I heard."

"Are you sure it's true?"

"Pretty sure, yeah. Vaughn would know I'd figure out if he was lying."

"Vaughn?"

"Vaughn's a nasty bitch in the cast who wants Anthony himself."

"Vaughn's a man?"

Carson laughed. "Yes. And he's been jealous of me since I started with the show. Anthony got me the part." He set down his fork and picked up a strip of sinfully delicious bacon. "And my apartment. *And* a lot of my food. And clothes. And he had the only computer I had access to." And he should shut up, he realized, since he'd as much as admitted to his landlord that he might not be able to afford his apartment anymore. He hoped Eddie had missed that part. Morose, he broke off one

end of the strip and popped it in his mouth to let the fatty goodness explode on his tongue. "Now I have to figure out how to live."

Eddie drank half his glass of orange juice, then set the glass down carefully. "Did you love him?"

Carson blinked. "Anthony?" He bit off and chewed more bacon to buy himself time. "I cared about him. But he didn't want me to love him."

"How long were you together?"

"Since April." Chew. "I *thought* I loved him. I mean, that's what we broke up about."

"Love?"

"Well, sort of. I thought we should have more of a relationship. It seemed natural to me that we should move in together." He laughed as he finished off the last of the strip of bacon. "But I've come to find out that I wasn't the only one he was with. I'm pretty sure I was the steadiest, but he had others. I think he might actually prefer women, to be honest. Of course, except for the penis, I'm not all that far from a woman, am I?" His laugh was hollow.

Eddie didn't share the laugh. "He dated women?"

"Yep."

"You knew?"

"I knew that before we got together. Then when we did…" He ducked his head, letting scarlet hair fall forward to shield half his face. "It was mostly just sex. But we had good times. I thought we were pretty good together."

"You broke up because you wanted more?"

"Yes. I wanted more; he wanted things to stay the same. He told me I'd miss him." Carson grimaced. "I'm such an idiot. I should have just let things go the way they were. Because *now* I find out that I only had my key part in the show because of him." The bacon went dry in his throat, and he had to force a swallow. "The director's been wanting to ditch my numbers for months, but he didn't because of

Anthony. Now…" He shoved away his plate and hid his face in his hand. "Now they're changing my parts, and it's going to be horrible. Because I'm not a good actor, and I'm only a passable dancer—" He throttled the tide of words, realizing that it just wasn't prudent to tell Eddie everything, much as he wanted to. Again he felt the burn of tears behind his tightly shut lids. "God, I'm so sick of this."

He heard the scrape of Eddie's stool on the linoleum but couldn't voice a protest to keep the other man away. Eddie was suddenly there, and those blessed arms were around him again.

"I'm sorry," Eddie murmured into his hair.

"Damn." Carson sank into Eddie and commenced crying again.

* * *

He woke a while later to the unfamiliar sound of football commentators. The television volume was turned low, but since it was the only sound, it reached Carson's muddled brain. He blinked in confusion, bringing the television set into focus, trying to remember whose it was. Then he realized there was a warm, solid body beneath him, and he knew. He lay on Eddie's couch and half on top of Eddie, who was sitting wedged in the corner of the couch. From his current vantage, Carson saw Eddie's socked foot propped on the coffee table.

Carson took a deep breath and stirred, activating the large, heavy hand that lay on his back to smooth up and down his spine. He spread a palm on Eddie's belly to push up and twist around to look the man in the face.

Eddie smiled. "Good nap?"

Carson closed his eyes. Opened them. "I fell asleep?"

"You were crying pretty hard. I think you wore yourself out."

"Oh, God." He brought a hand up in front of his eyes, which felt full of cotton. His nose had been running too. He must look a mess. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't be." Eddie handed him a tissue from the box that sat on the couch beside them. "I hope it helped."

Carson took the tissue and used it. He didn't know if the nap had helped. He wasn't sure what to make of the warmth in his body. But he *was* aware of the half wood he sported underneath the thin silk of his robe. Self-conscious, he curled in his legs and bunched the skirt of his robe into his lap as he sat up and away from Eddie's body—although, truly, all he really wanted to was to cuddle back under Eddie's arm. "I'm sorry," he murmured, confused. "I didn't mean… You must have a thousand things to do."

Eddie brought his foot down from the table in order to sit up. "It can all wait." He set the remote on the table instead. "I'd rather be there. For a friend."

Carson swallowed a groan. *Friend*, he told his cock. *He thinks of me as a friend*. It was heart-warming, really, and incredibly sweet. Also, evidently, a huge turn-on, since his cock just got harder instead of dwindling. "Thank you." He clutched silk to his crotch as he spilled his legs over the side of the couch. He didn't even have any shoes on, for Christ's sake. "But… Will you look at the time?" The cable box told him it was well past noon. "You shouldn't have let me sleep that long."

"I'm sorry." A hand smoothed his shoulder. "It looked like you needed it. Do you want me to go to your place and get some clothes?"

Yes. "No." He wanted the hand that was on his shoulder. He wanted that hand *so* much. He wanted it inside his robe, on his skin. He wanted to feel Eddie's skin and find out what that body hair felt like without fabric between them. He swallowed and stood. But no. He shouldn't. Eddie had been nothing but nice to him. He didn't deserve the kind of trouble Carson knew himself to be. "I-I should go. I'm going to miss my bus."

Eddie stood with him and edged that huge body closer. Carson felt singed by its warmth. "I could give you a lift, if you're going to be late."

"No." He found his hand on Eddie's arm. Why? To pull him closer or to keep him at bay? Carson wasn't sure. "Thanks. I'll be fine, but I…" He made the mistake of looking up into Eddie's sweet brown eyes. Except the sweet was different now.

Intoxicating. He had to be reading his own desire in those eyes. Naughty him! He forced a bright smile and stepped away. "I've got to go."

"Okay." Eddie followed him slowly as he backed toward the front door. "But if you need a ride, let me know."

Carson's back bumped the door. "I will. Thank you." He dropped the silk at his crotch to scramble for the doorknob, feeling like a fool. "Thank you again. For…everything."

Then he was on the other side of the door and bolting down the hallway. Thankfully, he only had to dash by two other tenants, who, other than giving him a strange look, disregarded him. At his own door, he had a moment of panic, wondering where his keys were. He just *couldn't* go back to Eddie's and ask to be let into his own apartment! But then he remembered and found them in the loose pocket of his robe, thankful they hadn't escaped during his flight. Or during his nap.

Oh, God, the nap! His mind wailed and his cock throbbed as he let himself in. A week without sex, and his body was primed, no longer used to going without. He raced to his bed, shedding his robe along the way. Lube and his favorite butt plug were immediately accessible in the top drawer of his nightstand, and he had his little friend oiled and inserted in record time. He groaned at the stretch in his anus, his naughty thoughts immediately summoning a fantasy of Eddie's cock in place of the plug. His cock had to be big to match the rest of him—big, with a thick nest of hair at the base to match his beard. Carson groaned aloud, clutching a pillow with one desperate hand and the shaft of his cock with the other as he curled into himself, getting lost in the fantasy.

He'd *never* fancied a hairy man before, but now he knew his body fit with Eddie's; now he'd felt the warmth of those solid muscles and those big, strong arms. He wanted to pour himself all over the man and take everything that sweet soul had to offer. "God!" he cried, inwardly chiding himself. He shouldn't think of Eddie like this. Eddie was just being nice. Eddie was just—"Oh!" His cock didn't care. His

clutching ass didn't care. His skin only knew chill after Eddie's heat. He wanted… He needed… He came with a blinding rush, screaming into his pillow.

Panting as he came down, Carson peeled the pillow from his face and slumped over the wet spot. He simply could *not* think of Eddie like that anymore. He had to get a hold of himself.

Chapter Seven

There was another one. Carson sighed and opened the sliding door so he could retrieve the gorgeous trio of roses that lay on his balcony. He buried his nose in the blooms and glanced across the garden at the dark square of Eddie's balcony door. There was no shadowy figure there this time. Eddie must already be about his chores.

Carson wandered back inside and headed for the kitchen. He pulled out one of the dozen different vases he now had. Thankfully, Eddie had switched to just leaving roses without the vases, because Carson didn't know what he'd do with the ones he had. His cabinets now contained more vases than plates or glasses. Eddie wouldn't take them back, and he refused to stop leaving bouquets at Carson's back door. No matter how many times Carson protested, Eddie just smiled and insisted the flowers needed to go to Carson. "*It's almost time that they'll stop blooming anyway*," he'd said the other day when Carson had again called him on it. "*It's a shame for them to go to waste*."

Carson carried the vase into his bedroom and switched it with a bouquet from a few days ago that was pretty much dead. He'd gotten pretty good at disposing of roses these days, he thought as he took the vase into the bathroom. The dead flowers went into the wastebasket, and he immediately flushed out the vase. Leaving it on the counter for now, he dumped an aspirin into his palm, then took it out to the new bouquet, laughing at his newfound knowledge.

He took a deep breath and glanced around the room at the five bouquets that adorned it. "It does make things smell nice." He even had a few buds pressed between the pages of some magazines that now sat underneath the weight of a full

suitcase. It probably wasn't exactly the right way to do it, but he didn't have any books that'd work. Hell, he'd even bought rose-colored sheets this past weekend. A splurge on his new budget, yes, but his old sheets were getting old and rank thanks to the amount of jerking off he'd been doing.

He really had to do something about that. And about the bouquets. Actually, about Eddie in general. The man had become a constant in his life. On the whole, he didn't mind. He liked having Eddie around. Even though they had nothing in common, they always managed to find something to talk about. Eddie had even gotten him to *almost* understand football, although he hadn't been mad when Carson declined watching another game with him. Carson had to wonder if Eddie was getting up earlier these days just so their schedules overlapped more.

Sighing, he opened a dresser drawer to pull out an old pair of jeans and a faded lime green T-shirt. It was Thursday, and he was up early so he could get some grocery shopping done with the last of his money before he had to head to work. He had just about enough time if he left soon. He'd spent much of the last few nights doing the math, and he figured he had just about fifty dollars to last him until payday. Of course, nearly all of that next check would go to the rent that was due, so he'd have to figure out how to eat next week.

He'd just pulled on his jeans when a knock sounded at the door. He hesitated, knowing it could only be one person. But he only paused an instant. Then he was out of the bedroom and opening the door for Eddie.

The big man stood in the hall, his hands laden with two clear plastic takeout containers filled with salad. If Carson had learned about Eddie in the past few weeks, Eddie had certainly learned about him too. Gone were all but the occasional offers of fattening foods, replaced with offers of salads or lightly prepared chicken or fish. When Carson had accused Eddie of altering his diet to suit Carson, Eddie had protested that it was about time he started eating healthier.

"Hey." Eddie held up the container. "I saw you moving around and thought you might be hungry."

Carson narrowed his eyes. “Eddie.”

Brown eyes lingered over Carson’s bare chest for just an instant too long before they found his face. “What? I got too much from Luis’s.”

“You mean you bought too much on purpose.”

Eddie strode past Carson, ignoring the objection. Carson just sighed and closed the door. Eddie had changed his grooming habits too. The beard these days was much better trimmed, maybe even combed, and he’d gotten a haircut that evened out the short brown locks. He’d stopped wearing baseball caps except when he was actively working on something, so Carson actually *saw* his hair now and again. The jeans and boots were his normal, but there was another new T-shirt, the stark white stretched over the expanse of Eddie’s muscles.

Enough. Carson had been avoiding this, but it was time to put his foot down, no matter how pleasant it was to have Eddie dote on him. “All right, Eddie, this has got to stop.” He pulled on his shirt as he strode to the tiny two-seater table that stood to the side in the living room. “You will not feed me anymore.”

Eddie kept putting out the napkins and plastic forks. “I don’t mind.”

“I know you don’t.” They’d had this discussion before. “And I do appreciate your concern, but I have to figure out my own way.”

Eddie nodded and sat carefully on one of the rickety chairs. “I know that. But until you do, you need to eat.”

Carson grumbled. “Eddie.”

Calm brown eyes regarded him, and he’d come to recognize that implacable gaze. “It’s already here, Carson.”

“I see that. That’s not the point.” Still, he sat and picked up the fork. He pointed the tines at Eddie. “No more.”

The big man shoved a bunch of lettuce into his mouth to avoid comment.

Carson shook his head, opening the plastic box. Turkey, olives, and tomatoes with light Italian dressing in a little cup. Just as he liked it. Eddie’s was more a

traditional cobb salad with ham and eggs. Eddie had even begun to order for him. "Eddie…"

"You're up early today. Going somewhere?"

"I was going to go grocery shopping, if you must know."

"If you like, I can drive you. I should do some—"

Carson slammed his hands on the table, causing lettuce to jump from both plastic boxes. "Eddie, enough. You can't do this to me."

Dark brows crowded over dark eyes. "I'm just trying to help you out."

"I *know*. I appreciate it. But…" He grumbled, pinching the bridge of his nose. "God, Eddie, I can't repay you for all the things you've already done for me."

"You don't have to—"

"That's what you say, but I feel… Don't you see that's what I was depending on Anthony for?" At some point, Eddie had dragged details out of him about Anthony and their relationship. The judgment Carson had expected hadn't come. Instead, Eddie had just listened, absorbing all that Carson told him. It was eerie sometimes how he did that. "I can't… At least with him, I knew what he expected from me." He opened his eyes and caught Eddie's guilty start. "Is that what you want from me? You want sex?" It was cruel and hurtful of him to say, but he needed this out in the open and over with. He'd been overlooking too many strange signals from Eddie.

Eddie's eyes went wide, and he pushed back from the table. Only he was much heavier than the table, so he actually pushed it into Carson's diaphragm. "Oh shit. I'm sorry."

Carson leaped from his chair to avoid most of the hit, but he wasn't willing to let the subject drop. He took a step closer to Eddie, hovering over him. "Is that really what you want from me?"

"No!" Said a little too quickly and with a bright red flush climbing up his neck. "I mean, not as payment…" His frown betrayed confusion.

Carson paused, surprised by Eddie's reaction. Sure, he'd suspected Eddie had developed a little crush on him, but he hadn't dreamed that Eddie had given it much thought. "Eddie." He kept his voice soft, no longer trying to poke the bear. "I thought you liked girls."

Eddie pushed to his feet and turned away from Carson. "I thought I did too. But you're…different."

He'd heard that one before. Encouraged it, even. "Look, Eddie, I know what I look like—"

"I know you're not a girl."

Carson hesitated, unsure how to voice what needed to be said. All of his previous lovers had been gay or admitted bisexual long before Carson met them. He'd dealt with straight men's confusion toward him, but only on a superficial level and usually by leaving the vicinity of the confused man. He'd lost a few potential friends that way, but this…this was different. Losing Eddie threatened to hurt. "Have you even *been* with a guy before?"

Eddie clomped across the room to the sliding glass door. "No."

"Have you even wanted to?"

"No."

"It *is* different, you know?"

Eddie crossed his arms over his chest and kept his face averted. "I know."

Carson crept up behind him and stopped at his side, less than an arm's length away. Eddie's profile showed a mass of confusion that cut Carson to the quick. "Eddie. I'm not…"

"I'm not the type you usually go for." Eddie nodded, as though he found some answers from staring into the garden. "I'm not rich, and I'm not good-looking. But I *can* take care of you." He turned suddenly, dropping his arms. His gaze on Carson's face was beseeching, needy. "You're everything. Beautiful. Different. Interesting.

You're everything I never could be. I look at you, and I want…" He raised a hand toward Carson, fingers reaching, clearly groping for words. "I want…you."

A piece of Carson's heart broke, and he felt the burn of tears at the corners of his eyes. "Oh, Eddie. I'm sorry. I…"

"Don't be sorry. Just…" Hesitantly, he reached out to grip Carson's shoulders. "Just let me…"

Carson allowed callused hands to pull him closer, all the while watching Eddie's face. He'd seen that desperation in men's faces before. Fascination. He often ran from it because it overwhelmed him. Until now, it had never made him feel safe. But in Eddie's eyes, that need sparked something in his chest that kept him from running. That made him want to lean forward.

Still… "Let you what?"

Eddie's hands spilled down his arms, then back up, as though he was warming Carson's skin. "I'm not sure." The look in his eyes denied his words. He knew what he wanted, but he wasn't sure he wanted to say it.

Carson laid a hand on Eddie's chest and felt the thudding of that tremendous heart. "Eddie. I don't want to hurt you." Ridiculous notion, that he could hurt this big man, but he knew it was true.

Eddie nodded, his focus on Carson's lips. "Okay."

Carson had a feeling he should stop the kiss as it descended. Surely nothing good could come of it. Why should they rock Eddie's world for what would be a passing fancy? It simply couldn't last. But when first the soft strands of beard and mustache and then the softer skin of lip brushed against him, he was helpless to do anything but succumb. Hesitant and unrehearsed, Eddie's lips fastened wetly on Carson's as his hands slid to Carson's back. Carson wound his arms up under Eddie's to hook on the meat of his shoulders. When Eddie's mouth opened, Carson yielded to the gently eager tongue that descended on his, drinking in Eddie's desperation. Despite the physical thrill of being in someone's arms again, it brought

about a calm for him, a surety that *this* he could do. If this was what Eddie needed, *this* he could provide.

Strong hands slid up his arms to cup his face, drawing him away from the kiss. He opened his eyes to see Eddie inspecting him from under lowered lids. “So beautiful. I can’t…help how I feel.”

Carson nipped at Eddie’s lower lip, then slowly stepped back. He reached up to grip Eddie’s hand and held it between them. “Are you sure?”

“That I want you? Yes.”

Carson let a small smile curl his lips. “Even though I’m not a girl?”

Eddie shook his head. “That doesn’t matter. Except…I’ve never…”

Carson’s smile grew, and he tugged at Eddie’s hand as he took a step backward. “I have.”

Don’t do this, a small voice told him as he drew Eddie into his bedroom. *Don’t ruin the best friendship you have*. But the tiny voice didn’t have a chance against the heat that filled his veins. Weeks of neglect and want took over, and he *would* have Eddie’s body finally. But if he did, he’d make damn good and sure that Eddie enjoyed it.

“Sit.” He pointed at the bed and released Eddie’s hand. When Eddie reached for him, he avoided him and pointed again. “Sit.”

Obediently, Eddie perched on the edge of Carson’s unmade bed, his rugged masculinity completely out of place against the rose sheets and the gold and white comforter.

“Take off your boots.” Carson turned away from Eddie and slowly lifted up his shirt, making sure Eddie got a good look at the smooth skin of his back before he pulled the shirt off to let his loose hair cascade down. The blond roots of his hair were just starting to show, but he doubted Eddie saw anything but the fake shining red. He turned back as he tossed the T-shirt over a chair already draped with clothes. His room was a mess, not the state he’d prefer when he took a new lover,

but again, he didn't think that Eddie cared. Not if he was to judge by the hungry look in those eyes or the way they wouldn't leave him as Eddie scrambled out of his boots.

"Now the shirt."

In two seconds flat, Eddie had his T-shirt up and over his head. Carson could only marvel at the play of muscles in tanned arms and at his first glimpse of the chest he'd imagined underneath. Just as furry as he'd thought, but in a lovely, almost artful form. Two fans of dark hair covered Eddie's pecs like wings tapering down a slim line that flared a little around his navel before disappearing into his waistband. The skin of his chest was paler than his arms, except for a triangle at the base of his throat. A workman's tan. Still, the skin was much darker than Carson's, a rich mocha latte underneath the hair that could have been dark chocolate shavings. Amused by his internal comparison, Carson approached, making sure Eddie could see how much Carson liked what he saw. "I've dreamed about your chest." As soon as he could, he slid a palm across one wing of curly hair, pleased to find it wiry but curiously soft.

"You have?" Eddie's normally low voice dived another octave, the rumble massaging an ache deep in Carson's belly.

"Mmmm." He let Eddie draw him closer with a hand at his hip while he continued to pet, circling around Eddie's nipple. "I've never been with a hairy man before."

"Oh." Eddie's other hand slid down the outside of Carson's thigh. "I'm sorry."

"God, don't be." Boldly, Carson drew up first one, then the other knee to straddle Eddie's lap. The bigger man instinctively grabbed his waist to steady him. "I know I'm gonna *love* feeling all this against my bare skin." To put action to words, he wrapped his arms around Eddie's neck and pulled himself closer, taking both a kiss and a good rub of chest to chest.

They both moaned. *Oh wow*. Carson's brain shorted for a moment as crisp curls caressed him. Both nipples perked as though seeking more contact. He rubbed

shamelessly against Eddie's pelt as he took control of their kiss, plunging his tongue into Eddie's mouth to draw out his tongue to play. Eddie's hand roamed Carson's back, his sides, seemingly unable to find purchase, but then they both slid down, over his jeans, and each big palm fit perfectly around Carson's butt cheeks. When Eddie squeezed, the thrill nearly made Carson come.

He pulled his head back, tilting his face to the ceiling. "Damn."

"Carson," Eddie murmured, beard brushing Carson's neck as Eddie's tongue lapped at his pulse.

Carson's hips bucked, pressing his cock into Eddie's belly. "Oh. Damn." He wove his fingers in Eddie's hair as he tried to pull it back together. *He* was the experienced one here. But… "Eddie." Strong fingers flexed and loosened, massaging Carson's ass. Lips and teeth sensitized his skin. *Oh, man*, he was going to come.

Somehow he found reserves he didn't know he had and unwound his arms from Eddie's neck. With monumental effort, he scooted back until he sat closer to Eddie's knees, pushing against Eddie's hands. "Lie back."

At first he didn't know if Eddie even heard him. Then the big man sank back. He would have pulled Carson with him, but Carson managed to break free and regain his feet. He stood on wobbly legs, taking in the sight of Eddie propped on his elbows, watching him. "You're a good kisser," Carson said with a grin.

That got him a smile. "So are you."

Carson trailed his hands down Eddie's chest, admiring the ridges of his belly as his hands approached Eddie's fly. A good-sized bulge promised a delicious treat within. "Let's get these jeans off you." Because he was watching, he saw the flash of hesitation. "Unless you don't want to."

The hesitation melted. "No." Eddie fell back as he reached for his fly with both hands.

Carson laughed and batted at the hands. "Quit it. This is *my* present to open."

Eddie gave him a sweet little grin as he put his elbows back underneath him.

Carson took his time, needing it to bring his own desperation under control. The overpowering scent of male that greeted him as he parted the two sides of Eddie's zipper nearly undid him. Gray boxer-briefs sported a precum spot. New briefs. From the look of them and the faint odor of soap, Carson got the distinct impression that Eddie had not only showered but changed into new underwear before coming to see him. Stifling a sob of joy, he buried his nose at the side of Eddie's bulge and inhaled. Excitement peaked again, and he had to hold himself very still to keep from coming unglued. Gentle fingers combed through his hair.

Back in control of himself, he hooked fingers in the briefs and pulled them down. "Oh yeah." Eddie's cock was every bit as large and delicious as Carson had anticipated. As an added bonus, he was uncut, a new experience for Carson. All that extra skin was flushed red with prominent purple veins down its length. Unable to help himself, Carson lapped up the shaft, groaning almost as much as Eddie while doing it. Forgetting his fingers still in the briefs that he held just at Eddie's balls, Carson popped the head of Eddie's cock into his mouth and sucked, running his tongue over the loose skin at his lips.

"Jesus! Fuck!" Eddie bucked underneath him, the fingers in Carson's hair clutching. Salty precum dribbled over Carson's tongue as he slid his lips farther down the shaft. "Carson, fuck."

Carson *loved* that he'd reduced Eddie to swearing. Needing to use his hands, Carson let his treat go with a loud, wet pop and pushed up so he could yank Eddie's jeans and underwear off. Thighs nearly as big around as Carson's waist lifted to help him. He couldn't take time to appreciate the sight of the naked man in his bed, too caught up in getting his lips back around that hard shaft. Eddie yelped when Carson swallowed him down. Carson wasn't a deep throater, but he made do with what he could, and none of his lovers had ever complained. He lapped at Eddie's shaft until both it and his hands were saliva wet. Then he used both hands and his mouth to completely cover it from base to tip. Squeezing firmly, he sucked as he

pulled up, wanting Eddie to feel it along his entire organ. Judging from Eddie's strangled shout and the buck of his hips, Carson succeeded in his goal.

"Oh, God, Carson. Carson, wait." Fingers tightened in his hair, making him stop. "Please. I'm gonna blow."

Carson gave Eddie a wet grin. "That's the point."

Eddie had to swallow, his entire face flushed and wet with a sheen of sweat. "I want…"

Oh, God, he wants to fuck me. Carson had steeled himself against it, thinking if he got Eddie off, he could allow his friend to come to his senses. Sucking cock was enough for him. "It's okay. Come in my mouth."

The fingers yanked his head back, and Eddie showed amazing abs strength by using only those to pull up until he was sitting. He cupped Carson's face in his hands and drew it up for a kiss. "I want to fuck you." He said it quickly, as though he'd lose his nerve if he didn't. "Please? That's…okay, isn't it?"

Carson dug his fingers into the thick meat of Eddie's thighs. Was it okay with him? "If…if that's what you want."

Eddie devoured his mouth as one callused hand slid down Carson's back and plunged fingers as deep as they could go into Carson's jeans. Since the jeans were old, it was pretty far, and Eddie almost got a full handful to squeeze. "Yes."

Carson just about fainted. He felt his brain floating from his body. No, that was his body floating as Eddie switched his hold and lifted Carson easily into the air. He landed gently on his back, Eddie's big hand cradling his skull. Eddie kissed him senseless as his hands roamed Carson's bare chest and sides before finding his fly. Since Carson hadn't bothered with underwear, the cool air reached his cock immediately as it sprang free.

"Wait."

Eddie didn't, wrapping one palm and five marvelous fingers around Carson's shaft. One hand got it all, and one squeeze nearly had Carson coming. He beat at Eddie's shoulders, unable to voice a protest.

The grip eased. "Did I hurt you?"

Carson panted. "God, no. Wait!" He caught Eddie's wrist before the man could make him go off. "I want…to ride you." He found Eddie's gaze and held it. "It'll be easier for both of us."

Eddie blinked, banking only a little of the fire in the chocolate depths of his eyes. "Oh. Okay."

Carson nodded as the bigger man rolled away, freeing him. Damn, once Eddie got started, he was like a steam train. Carson wiggled free to the edge of the bed and opened the nightstand drawer. Eddie's fingers trailed over the back of his hip and the top swells of his butt as he retrieved the lube and a condom. God, would it even fit on Eddie's cock? They'd have to see. He turned back around and held out the packet to Eddie. "Here, put this on." That'd keep his roaming hands busy while Carson lubed himself up. Eddie watched Carson kneel on the bed as he tore open the condom and stalled briefly when Carson poured lube onto his fingers.

"Oh, man." Eddie groaned, gaze glued to Carson's hand even as it disappeared from view behind him.

"Have you ever"—Carson had to pause as he breached his ass with two fingers, always an enjoyable sensation but especially so when a lover was watching—"ever had anal sex?"

"No." With just a few glances, Eddie lowered the condom to that baseball bat he had for a cock and started to roll it on. Carson was relieved to see that it would fit. Maybe Eddie's cock just *looked* bigger.

Carson rolled on his own fingers before drawing them out to get more lube. "It's pretty much the same except… Mmmm…" He wasn't really trying to be seductive; he just really liked the sensation of being full. "You're pretty big, so I'll need to get—oh!—used to it."

"I won't hurt you?"

Carson's eyes dropped to Eddie's sheathed cock, and he damn near drooled. "A little," he admitted, "but I'll like it. Trust me."

Eddie's gaze didn't stop roaming Carson's body, as though he wanted to take it all in at once. "You are *so* beautiful. I knew you were, but…right now…"

"You sweet talker." He'd had as much as he could take. He needed that cock inside him, and he needed it *now*. He snapped the lube bottle closed and tossed it aside, handily close if needed.

Eddie sank back into the pillows as Carson crawled over him. His hands came up to caress Carson's sides. "It's true."

Carson tossed scarlet hair behind his shoulder as he reared up over Eddie's lap. He didn't care to talk about his looks right now. He needed fucking. He grabbed Eddie's cock and thrust his own hips forward. Eddie's grip on his waist kept him steady as he rubbed the tip between his cheeks, finding his hole. He bit his lip, savoring the last moment of anticipation before he eased down to let Eddie breach him. "God." So good, such a stretch. It burned his neglected ring as Eddie's steely girth impaled him. So much. He was full before he had it all and had to pull up so he could push down again, determined to take as much of Eddie as he could.

When he could stand it, he glanced down, then almost came at the mere sight of pure, unadulterated lust in Eddie's face. Eyes closed, mouth drawn in what could easily have been pain, Eddie panted under a sheen of sweat as his fingers dug into Carson's ass. *Oh, man*. Carson leaned back, finding Eddie's thighs for balance as he brought his ass down as far as it would go. Still not enough. Eddie had more to give, easily the largest cock Carson had ridden. He felt full to bursting in a nearly painful ache. An ache that he knew wouldn't last long but he never wanted to end. He rocked his hips up, letting Eddie's girth drag along that oh so sweet spot within him. There was no reprieve from the sizzling pleasure, either on the upstroke or the downstroke. There was only agonizing need that drove him to pump his hips harder, faster.

He heard his own moans and cries bouncing off the ceiling but couldn't care to decipher what he said. Eddie's grunts and groans mingled with his. At some point Eddie sat up, one hand splayed across Carson's back. The support allowed Carson more freedom of movement, and the new position rubbed his cock along Eddie's belly. He clutched Eddie's shoulders, crying out as he raced for completion. Eddie's murmuring caressed his throat and collarbone, chased by soft curls and softer lips. Then Eddie gripped Carson's cock and squeezed, and that was it. The top of Carson's head blew off as his entire groin exploded in molten lava. Every muscle he had jerked uncontrollably as he spilled onto Eddie's chest.

Shaking, dizzy, he held on for dear life as Eddie's fingers dug into his hips, rocking him gently to the rhythm of urgent grunts pushed from Eddie's throat. He was close, and Carson wouldn't dream of spoiling it for him. He followed Eddie's motion, pushing a little harder, digging his fingers into Eddie's hair and curling in so his breath filled Eddie's ear. "Fuck me," he whispered. With a grateful sigh, Eddie grunted one last time, his grip painful as he shuddered his climax.

Carson stayed curled around Eddie's head, shaken by what they'd just shared. Was it because it'd been weeks for him? Was it Eddie's size? Was it Eddie's touching care and adorable need? Whatever, Carson was wrung to the bone and satisfied as he'd been only a handful of times in his life. *Shit*. Unable to regret it now, he melted into Eddie's embrace, relaxing as Eddie's cock softened and slipped from his body. "Gotta lie down."

Eddie took them both to their sides without losing much of his hold on Carson. They lay side by side, breathing. Carson didn't know if Eddie was looking at him, because he was too much of a coward to open his eyes and see.

Soft lips brushed his chin just as he was nodding off. "I gotta take this off."

Having forgotten the condom, Carson just nodded and loosened his hold on Eddie. He was aware of the mattress moving as the other man rolled off it. He was vaguely aware of sounds in the bathroom. Not much else. Sleep tackled him and took him under.

Chapter Eight

"Carson."

Deep in a warm, safe place, Carson didn't want to heed the intruding voice, nice as it was. He rolled away from it.

"Carson." A hand on his bare shoulder shook him gently. "Wake up."

"No." On his belly, he slipped his arms under his pillow and buried his face in it.

The shaking got stronger. "Carson, your phone is ringing, and the caller ID says Lacey. Didn't you say that's your stage manager?"

Alarm catapulted Carson up to his knees. Eyes open, it still took a few heartbeats for his brain to kick in. It was light. No, that was from the lamp at the bedside. Turning his head, he looked past Eddie's bulk to the curtains parted to show the darkened window behind. Not night dark, but definitely twilight. "What time is it?"

Eddie lowered Carson's phone on his thigh. "Almost six."

"Oh fuck!" In a flurry of movement, he shot from the bed. "Oh fuck, oh fuck. I'm late." He raced into the bathroom and screwed on the water. Even half-aware, he knew he reeked of sex. The trickle of pleasure that shimmied up his spine at the memory was quickly doused by panic. "I'm so dead."

Already naked, he jumped into the shower for one of the quickest washes of his life. Once out, he toweled his head, lamenting that he had no time to blow his hair dry. As he was combing mousse through his locks, Eddie appeared in the empty doorway.

“Is there anything I can do?”

Even though Carson was rushed, he took a moment to rake his gaze up and down Eddie’s body. He knew that body now in intimate detail, and a burble of joy deep in his belly assured him that he wanted to get to know it better.

Later.

“No. I gotta go.” He whimpered as he concentrated on a knot. “I’m supposed to be there at six. Oh, wait.” He dropped the comb on the counter by the sink. “Where’s my phone?”

“On the bed.”

Carson rushed past Eddie, trailing a hand over Eddie’s chest just because. Eddie was fully clothed, unfortunately, but the T-shirt was warm from his body.

Lacey picked up after the first ring. “Where are you?”

“I overslept. I’m on my way.”

“When will you be here?” Her voice was quiet and just slightly shrill with panic. She got that way when practically any little thing went wrong. Not that his being late could be considered little.

He groaned, thinking quickly. He’d missed his normal bus, but that same route made the stop every half hour. He might even be lucky and catch the express that only stopped at every third stop that his normal bus did. “Seven?”

“You need to be here now. Mark’s looking for you.”

He shot to his feet and headed for the closet. “I’m hurrying. I’ll be there before curtain.”

“You better be. Hurry.” She hung up.

Carson practically jumped into a thong and pulled out the first pair of slacks he could find.

“Can I give you a ride to the theater?”

Carson jumped, not having realized Eddie stood just beyond arm's length. He stared up at that kind, concerned face and calculated. The hour-long bus trip was only fifteen minutes tops by car, less in good traffic. "Could you?"

"Of course." There was that adorable flush. "It's my fault you're late." He reached up to scratch the short hair atop his skull. "I shouldn't have let you sleep that long."

Joy propelled Carson into Eddie's chest, his arms flinging around the other man's neck. His weight brought Eddie's face down to his level for a sloppy, wet kiss. "You *wonderful* man, you! If you could give me a ride, I'll almost be on time."

Eddie grinned, his hands gentle to either side of Carson's waist. He looked a tad shell-shocked for the kiss, tongue darting out to lick his lips as his eyes locked on Carson's mouth. He enjoyed it, Carson assured himself, dismissing the worry that Eddie would be distant and weird now that the sex had happened. Judging by the look on his face and the fact that he'd stayed to watch over Carson's sleep, he most assuredly wanted it again.

Later.

Giving in to a quick kiss, Carson had to let Eddie go. "I've got to get dressed."

Eddie's fingers closed into his palms as Carson slipped from his grip, but he straightened and nodded. "Right. I'll bring the truck around front?"

"That'd be great."

Eddie left, and despite the race of his heart and his rush to find a shirt, socks, and shoes, Carson found himself giggling.

* * *

Carson clambered up into the truck's passenger seat, pulling his bag in after him. He'd never been in one of these huge trucks before, the kind where the cab was actually more of a small car that just happened to have a truck bed in back. This one had a completely serviceable backseat, although it was currently occupied by a tool chest, a few boxes, and a bunch more loose tools underneath some canvas. Only

the logo on the dashboard told him the make of the vehicle; otherwise he would have just said it was big and green.

Eddie started off before Carson could even get buckled in, caught in Carson's rush. He handled the big truck with ease, his hands comfortable on the leather-wrapped steering wheel and on the knob of the stick shift.

After giving Eddie initial directions, Carson sighed, sitting back after shoving his duffel onto the ample floor space at his feet. "Thank you so much for doing this."

"It's the least I could do," Eddie watched the road from behind dark sunglasses. They were Ray-Ban knockoffs, but they made him look kind of hip. His baseball cap was back on, and his snug white shirt gave a good idea of the goodies within.

Feeling devilish, Carson grinned. "You mean after fucking me into the mattress?"

There was that blush again, accompanied by a small grin. "Yeah."

Carson sat back, running his fingers through still-damp hair. "Of course, that's not quite right. I guess I was riding you." He should have let this go, he supposed. It would be good of him not to embarrass the nice man. But he excused himself with the knowledge that it was best that Eddie knew he was outspoken from the first, at least where sex was concerned. "And, man, was it a good ride."

Eddie's grin grew. "I enjoyed it."

Carson chortled. "Did you? Not freaked that I'm not a girl?"

There was no hesitation to Eddie's shake of the head. He gave Carson a shy glance before returning his gaze to the road. "Nope."

"Mmm." Carson leaned over the center console as far as he could go and pushed his nose into Eddie's shoulder. Like a cat, he turned his head to rub with his cheek. "Anytime you want to try again, big boy, you let me know."

To his delight, Eddie's hand came up to caress his other cheek. "We can't now. You're going to be late."

Carson's laughter filled the cab as he resumed his seat. "Yeah, okay, point taken. But when I'm not at work, I'm your man."

He deliberately kept his eyes forward after he said that, but through his periphery vision, he was well aware of Eddie's brief, measuring glance.

* * *

They reached the Glousen in just short of fifteen minutes, making him only a half hour late. This wasn't so bad. He'd been this late before and still gotten onstage in plenty of time, and that had been when he was part of the opening act, which he was not anymore. He should be fine.

Panic eased, he gave in to the temptation of bestowing a brief kiss on Eddie's lips before he climbed out of the truck. He didn't give Eddie time to respond to it or his accompanying "thank you" before he was gone and rushing toward the backstage entrance.

Lacey was at her nightly post at the door, which meant everything elsewhere must be going smoothly. She looked up and breathed a loud sigh when she saw him. "You're here."

He grinned. "I made it."

She frowned and pulled him close. "Listen, keep your head down. Mark's been looking for you. I had to tell him you weren't here."

His grin faded to a frown. "It's only a half hour. I've been later before."

"I know." She glanced behind him. "It's just…" She shook her head and pushed him toward the hall. "Never mind. Go on. Get ready."

"What's wrong?"

She shook her head again and turned back to her podium.

Although he knew the worry she showed didn't bode well, he left her alone and went to the dressing room. No sense in making himself later.

"There you are," Henny greeted him as she continued to sponge on her face makeup. "Mark's been looking for you."

"So I've heard." He grimaced as he sat, not only unhappy from his moment with Lacey but also bummed that the Eddie joy train seemed to have left him.

Henny paused, turning toward him. "You okay, honey?"

He glanced up at her as a gaggle of others passed behind him, crinolines and feathers rustling in the breeze. He summoned a wicked grin. "Guess why I was late?"

It only took her a second. After a muted hoot, she pointed at him with her makeup sponge. "You are *so* filling me in later."

Some of his good mood back, he opened his kit. "Oh yes." Now, could he salvage the dredge of his hair?

* * *

Mark found Carson just before he went onstage for his first number, and made him promise to come see him after the show. Carson tried not to worry about it for the rest of the night, but he did wonder what Mark looked so pissy about. It wasn't like Carson hadn't been late before. He hadn't missed his first number, after all. What harm was done?

The offices were upstairs over the kitchen and storage rooms. Thodd and the producers shared the bigger—and nicer—one, leaving Mark to share with Lacey and anyone else who ranked some privacy. The stairway was narrow, and the hallway upstairs wasn't much wider. The fact that it was painted black didn't help relieve the cave atmosphere. The bigger office was at the end of the hall, the smaller to Carson's right. The door was open. Inside, the ten-by-ten space held a desk, a filing cabinet, and four chairs. It did have a nice view of the park across the street, although it wasn't much to see at one in the morning. The desk lamp shed some light, but Mark was mostly illuminated by the white-blue glow from his laptop. When he saw Carson, he shut the lid on his computer, sucking some much-needed light from the room.

If he hadn't guessed already, the grim set to Mark's mouth assured Carson that something was wrong. Back in the slacks and frilly blouse he'd worn when he

arrived with his hair loose down his back, Carson stood before the desk and waited. Mark folded his hands on the laptop and watched him.

"Look," Mark finally started, "I don't care what kind of arrangement you and Anthony used to have, but he tells me it's over between you two."

Carson frowned. "What do you mean by 'arrangement'?"

Mark pointed a finger. "I mean the special treatment stops. I will not put up with your behavior. Do you understand me? Neither will Thodd. No more strolling in late. No more random days off with pay."

He hadn't taken a "random day off" in months, and when he had, it'd been at Anthony's insistence. "Mark, I'm sorry I was late tonight. I overslept and—"

"I don't care. I really don't." He and Mark had never become especially close, but the stage manager had never treated him so coldly before. "Call time is at six. You're to call by five thirty if you'll be late. That's part of your contract."

It was difficult to speak over the lump in his throat, but he refused to cry. "I know. I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

"No. It won't." Mark picked up a single sheet of paper. "Here, sign this. You're on probation."

Carson stared at the paper and the pen that sat next to where Mark set it down. "What? Why? I was late once—"

"This isn't nearly the first time."

No, it wasn't, but the other times weren't his fault! "I know. But this was an accident—"

"An accident you need to make sure doesn't happen again, or you're fired. Do we understand each other?"

Carson swallowed his protest. "Understood."

"Good. Sign." As Carson reluctantly signed the acknowledgement of the probation, Mark picked up a paycheck envelope that had been tucked under the laptop. "You also need to know that your pay is reduced."

Carson hesitated before taking the envelope. “What?”

Mark stood and turned toward the cheap little copier/printer behind the desk. He spoke with his back to Carson. “You no longer get a featured rate, and you’re in fewer numbers. The adjustment’s been overlooked until now, but it’s been adjusted in this one. We’ll let the last few slide.”

Carson looked at the envelope, shocked. He’d barely made what he got last month work for him and had been looking to this check to catch up a little. What was he going to do with less?

Mark handed him his copy of the probation document, then sat and folded his hands on the laptop again. “If you’re in need of money, you can always work the crowd after the show. The pay itself isn’t great, but someone like you could make a lot in tips.”

Someone like you. Carson stared. Since it was a burlesque show, there was a certain racy element involved. Because of that, the performers were encouraged to work the crowd in the club that started after the show. In costume, they mingled and talked to people. On the surface, it was to get them to buy food and drinks and to dance, just like a hostess club where men paid to talk to pretty girls. On the sly, if a performer found someone to pay him for a little something *more*, no one discouraged it. To date, Carson had never worked the floor. Anthony hadn’t let him and had looked down on the performers who did. The idea wasn’t appealing to Carson. Whatever else he was, that was a little too close to whoring for his liking.

When Carson said nothing, Mark shrugged. “We’re done unless you have anything else.”

He had a bunch of things, but none of it complimentary or smart to say aloud. Not trusting his tongue, he shook his head.

Mark nodded. “Good night. See you tomorrow.”

Shell-shocked, Carson left the office. At the bottom of the stairs, he turned in to the kitchen rather than toward the dance music that filled the dinner club. He wasn’t ready to share his shame; neither was he dressed to be seen in public.

Ignoring the ache of longing as he put his back to the nightly party, he sneaked out past the scurrying waiters. He kept his head down, dejected as he headed for the bus stop. What was he going to do? It was the beginning of November. He had one more check midmonth. Depending on how much Mark cut his rate, he might just have enough to cover rent next month. Just. That didn't leave anything for food or the gas bill, and he was pretty sure the bimonthly electricity bill was due right after the first of the month.

He was screwed.

Caught in his own misery, he didn't really hear the horn at first. But then it was right beside him, blaring from the street. Jumping, he whirled to see a big truck keeping pace with him in the middle of the narrow street. Traffic was pretty light this time of night since the Glousen was the only attraction that was open, so there were no other cars to honk as the truck stopped.

The window was down, and Eddie smiled at him from the driver's seat. "Need a ride?"

Carson's heart lifted, and he was smiling before he realized. "What are you doing here?"

"I stayed to see the show."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Carson demanded as he stepped into the street.

"I didn't know how to get word to you."

He came close to the window and stopped. Any closer and he'd have to crane his neck way too far to see Eddie up there. "You've been here all this time?"

Eddie nodded. "I liked the show." He chuckled. "I didn't *get* it all—it moved so fast. But you were great. I knew you'd be a wonderful dancer."

He wasn't, but it was sweet of Eddie to say so. Carson felt himself blush. "You didn't have to do that."

"I wanted to. Come on. Get in."

As he rounded the front of the truck, Carson frowned as he realized something. “The show ended nearly an hour ago,” he protested as he climbed into the passenger seat. “Have you been waiting all this time?”

“Yeah. Thought I could drive you home.”

“Eddie. You should have called me.”

“Forgot my cell at home.” He watched Carson as he shut the door, one beefy arm draped over the steering wheel. “I was inside. Saw some of you guys come out to the audience. I asked one about you, and she said you’d be backstage if you weren’t gone yet.” Since Carson was settled, Eddie faced forward and put the truck in gear. “I was waiting by the back door.”

They could have missed each other since Carson had come out another door. But the kitchen door wasn’t all that far from the backstage entrance.

“Thank you.” Carson pulled on his seatbelt. “But you shouldn’t have.”

Eddie kept driving.

“So,” Carson started a few minutes later, needing to fill the quiet, “you liked the show?”

“It was great. Colorful.”

“Bawdy.”

“That too. You looked terrific.”

He allowed himself a small smile. “I’m sure I wasn’t the only one.”

“I didn’t really watch anyone but you.”

Carson grinned, propping his elbow on the passenger window. “I wasn’t in every sketch.”

“I thought the rest of it was okay too.”

Eddie’s obvious bias warmed Carson’s heart and made him laugh, a welcome feeling after his time in the theater tonight. “Thank you. For staying. I wish you’d told me, though. I would have gotten you a dinner ticket.”

“It’s okay. I sat in the balcony. It’s a great view.”

Carson kept his tongue. Even the balcony seats—those without tables for dining—were fifty dollars.

They reached some traffic in a more populated area. "Are you hungry? We could find an all-night diner."

"I…" He was too embarrassed to mention that he didn't have any cash. "No. Thanks."

"You didn't eat your salad this afternoon."

"Eddie, we talked about this…"

"I know. We don't have to go anywhere expensive. How about if we just order one dinner and share?"

Starving, Carson kind of had to give in. When they sat at the diner, Eddie ordered two plates of food for them anyway, despite Carson's protests. He was getting good at that.

Carson watched him eat, having developed a new appreciation of the man that afternoon. He wasn't nearly as rough and worn as he looked. As Eddie talked about the show, Carson was surprised to realize that he was much more culturally aware than Carson had suspected. When Carson explained the history behind some of the traditional burlesque numbers, Eddie listened with fascination and threw in bits and pieces of other history that he remembered. Today had proven to be an eye-opener about Eddie for Carson. If the sex wasn't enough, now Carson found out that Eddie was smarter than Carson had given him credit for. He was also fun and easy to be with. Just because he didn't talk all that much didn't mean he didn't know anything. By the time they made it back to the apartment building, Carson had almost forgotten the scene with Mark and its consequences.

Carson led the way up the short flight of outside steps that took them from the tenant parking lot to the side door closest to Eddie's place. He glanced down the long expanse of blue carpet that would eventually lead around to his own lonely apartment. He didn't want to be alone. Alone, he might have to think. Worry.

Perhaps reading his mind, Eddie slid a hand across the back of Carson's shoulder. "You want…?" He stepped closer. "I'd like it if you spent the night with me."

Surprised, Carson turned and tilted his face up.

Eyes down, nostrils flared, Eddie's face was as ruddy red as it got. "We don't have to do anything. If you don't want."

Carson stepped into Eddie's warmth, inching his hand up the man's chest. "What if I *do* want?"

Eddie smiled, peeking at him through thick dark lashes. "That's good too."

Carson traced the collar of Eddie's T-shirt. Had he ever seen Eddie in any other kind of shirt? "Do you have supplies?"

"Supplies?"

Carson met his eyes and waited.

Understanding wasn't long in coming. "Oh. No. I've got some vegetable oil and maybe some lotion…"

Carson laughed softly, tucking his finger in the collar and tugging gently. "Either of those'll do in a pinch, but I much prefer lube. Besides, we need a condom too."

Eddie's fingers closed on Carson's wrist, holding his hand close. He was still having trouble meeting Carson's eyes, and that adorable flush showed on his neck beneath his beard. "We could go to your place."

Carson dismissed that idea immediately. "No." That was the last place he wanted to be tonight. He needed to not think about his troubles. "Let me drop off my stuff, and I'll meet you at your place in a few minutes."

To his delight, Eddie leaned in to brush a shy kiss over his lips. "Just a few minutes, yeah? Any longer and I'll come find you."

"Mmm. Demanding, are we?"

"No. I just want…you."

Warmth suffused Carson's chest, lifting him to his toes so he could claim another kiss. He wouldn't turn down this shy offer for the world. "I'll be right back."

He didn't run until he'd rounded the corner out of sight of Eddie, but it was a close thing. He had his keys in hand by the time he reached the door and didn't even bother with the lights as he dumped his bag inside. Enough light spilled in through the sliding glass door to lead him to the bedroom, and he found the lube and condoms in the shadows. He shoved them and a change of clothes into a handy tote bag, pocketed his keys, and then was racing back to Eddie's embrace.

Eddie's door was cracked, and the man himself was in his bedroom. Shirt and shoes were off, but his jeans were still on. One bedside lamp shed a pool of amber light on dark green sheets revealed under a turned-down gold and white spread. When he heard Carson at the door, Eddie spun to face him but remained at the bedside. Eyes wide, lips parted, he watched Carson come toward him. Entranced by Eddie's hesitation, Carson slowed down. He tossed his bag onto a gold wing chair as he passed it, then reached up to comb a hand through his hair. As he shook red waves free over his shoulders, he monitored Eddie's reaction. The hair snagged his attention, changing the look of apprehension into one of wonder. By the time Carson stood before him, his eyes were back to normal, and some of the tension had leaked from his shoulders. A smile even teased at the corners of his mouth.

Carson laid a palm in the center of his chest, enjoying the cushion of hair that pressed his palm. "Hi."

Eddie's hands found Carson's sides, pulling him a few inches closer. "Hi."

Carson tangled his fingers in Eddie's pelt, fascinated by the soft black mat. "You sure about this?"

Eddie ran his hands up Carson's arms, past his shoulders and neck to cradle his jaw. His eyes finally met Carson's fully, dark and intense. "Yes." Before Carson could consider protesting, Eddie's lips took his in a demanding kiss. He tilted Carson's head to the side in order to slant his lips for a tighter seal, then opened and pushed his tongue inside.

Carson heard his own moan as he swayed into Eddie, absorbing the strength of the man. He slipped his arms around to Eddie's back, spreading his palms over the smooth skin stretched tight over taut muscle. As the kiss went on, Eddie's arms wrapped around his shoulders, pulling Carson flush against his chest without ever losing the connections of their mouths. Carson submitted completely, allowing Eddie to lead, enjoying the hell out of the circle of arms and the interesting hair that rubbed his chest, chin, cheeks, and belly. He had to wonder how long Eddie intended to kiss him—not that he minded. It'd been ages since anyone had simply kissed him. But his cock had grown painfully hard, and he ached to free the bulge he felt in Eddie's jeans.

Finally Eddie moaned. The fingers of one hand came up to thread through the hair at the back of Carson's skull. Gently he pulled Carson's head back. "I need to sit down."

Laughing, Carson brought his hands around to plant his palms on Eddie's chest. "Then sit, you fool," he chided with a smile, pushing the bigger man toward the mattress.

Eddie let his hand slip from Carson's hair, but he kept hold of his side, pulling until he sat and Carson stood between his knees. Holding Carson's hips, he buried his nose in the blouse ruffles right over Carson's heart. Carson stroked the short fur atop Eddie's head as the man inhaled him. Eddie's hands left his waist to start unbuttoning Carson's blouse from the bottom up. Carson helped out by starting on the top buttons. When they met in the center of Carson's body, Eddie parted the two sides of the garment, then pressed his nose to Carson's skin and inhaled again. "You smell good."

"I must smell sweaty and rank."

A wet tongue swiped at his left nipple. "Maybe sweaty. It's good."

Carson shuddered as Eddie explored him, fingers kneading his sides. He slid the blouse down his arms and let it drop to a puddle at his feet as Eddie ran rough-skinned hands up his chest, watching, absorbing. His thumbs found Carson's

nipples, scraping them quickly to hardness. Fascinated by the care he took, Carson just let himself be explored, his hands resting lightly on Eddie's shoulders. After sucking both nipples and lapping at all of the skin between and around them, Eddie growled softly. "So beautiful," he murmured, perhaps not for Carson's ears, as his hands skimmed around the waistband of Carson's slacks.

When one hand slipped down to cup Carson's cock through the fabric, Carson had finally had enough. "All right." He danced backward. "Hold on. I need to get these off."

Clearly spellbound, Eddie just watched as Carson sat on the chair to quickly untie and remove his shoes and socks. Standing, he made quick work of his slacks and thong, leaving himself naked before the rapt attention of the other man. His cock took notice, appreciating the attention. Moaning a little, he took himself in hand, strangling the base of his cock to hold himself back. He yelped when Eddie rushed forward, dropping his knees to the carpet at Carson's feet. He grabbed Carson's wrist, pulled his hand away, and replaced Carson's grip with his own. Except he didn't squeeze to stop the pleasure—he squeezed to bring it, pulling up the shaft to encompass the head.

"God." Carson groaned and pitched forward, catching himself on Eddie's shoulders. Eddie brought his grip back down the shaft. As soon as the head was exposed, Eddie's mouth covered it, his lips forming a loose seal around the rim and his tongue lashing at the tip. "Oh fuck." Carson folded over him, scrabbling at Eddie's back in an attempt to scrape back the sudden surge of pleasure. He wasn't ready for Eddie's mouth, wasn't ready for the quick and intense suction. His hips bucked forward, and the tip of him rubbed the roof of Eddie's mouth, lodging against his tongue at the back. Eddie gagged a little, but when Carson muttered an apology and tried to pull back, Eddie's free hand clamped on his buttock, preventing his escape. Eddie worked him, perhaps inexpertly but very well, his enthusiasm more than making up for lack of skill. "Eddie, wait." Frantic, Carson tugged at his ears, finding no hair to pull. "I'm coming."

Eddie tried, but clearly the sensation of hot cum spurting into his mouth was more than he'd bargained for. He startled back, mouth open so most of Carson's cum landed on his tongue, lips, and beard. Carson stared, amazed at the sight of wet white ropes across the black of that beard. *So sexy*. He wanted to drop down and lap it up.

Eddie didn't give him a chance. The big man rose to his feet. He took hold of Carson's waist and practically lifted and tossed him toward the bed. Carson's back hit the mattress and bounced. He lay sprawled, spread, watching Eddie's eyes devour him. Shyness had melted into need, and no hesitation marked Eddie's face as he yanked his jeans open. Carson licked his lips, attention dropping to the parting of denim. But Eddie turned from him before shoving the jeans down his legs. Carson pushed up onto his elbows, ready to protest, but it died on his lips when he saw Eddie reach for the bag Carson had tossed on the chair. A quick rummage, and Eddie found the strip of condoms and the half-empty bottle of lube. He brought them back to toss them on the mattress beside Carson, then finished with his jeans and underwear. His rock-hard cock bobbed as he bent, slapping against his taut belly. Carson nearly died at the sight of it, his ass clenching in anticipation.

He snatched a condom and sat up, meeting Eddie mattress-side before the bigger man could climb on. He had the packet open and was rolling latex onto Eddie's cock before he could be tempted to take the tasty meat into his mouth. If he started a blowjob, he'd have to finish it, and he just needed to be fucked. Right. Now. Eddie groaned, fingers in Carson's hair as Carson reached for the lube, then slathered a goodly amount over Eddie's cock. He made a grunt of protest when Carson released him, and only watched as Carson tossed the bottle aside, then scrambled farther up on the bed on his hands and knees, ass toward Eddie. He spread his knees and braced his shoulders on the mattress, freeing his hands to reach back to spread his butt cheeks. "Fuck me," he demanded softly, watching Eddie over his shoulder as he probed his own hole with slick fingers. Instant heat flared in Eddie's eyes, and he jumped to obey, climbing up to kneel behind Carson.

Carson let his hands drop when Eddie palmed his butt, parting the cheeks for himself. “Now,” Carson prompted when Eddie started to massage. He rotated his hips, encouraging. “Please.”

With another groan, Eddie aimed, setting the tip of his cock at Carson’s entrance. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Just push.” Some reason sparked. “Slowly.” He tried to push back and got a little bit of the tip inside him. “Please, Eddie.”

Fingers digging into Carson’s hips, Eddie pushed in. With his grip, he kept Carson from pushing back but did keep pushing steadily, working his way deep into Carson’s body. Carson gave up trying to help after the tip popped in. He shut his eyes and let out a loud moan, simply enjoying the stretch of his channel around the thick invader. “Yes, God, yes, please.” He kept up a steady litany of encouragement, desperate for Eddie to fill him. At last he felt the prickle of pubic hair against the sensitive skin of his ass. Eddie had fit as much inside as was going to go. Carson felt stuffed to bursting. It was glorious. “Fuck me.” He groaned, clutching the sheets to either side of his head. “Oh, please, fuck me.”

Using the same grip on his hips, Eddie pulled Carson forward, nearly off his cock. When he was almost out, he stopped, then reversed the motion, sheathing himself in Carson’s body. So strong. Carson didn’t have to do anything but go limp and let him work as he pulled and pushed. In. Out. In. “Yes.” Carson couldn’t keep still. Despite it all, he tried to shove back, to impale himself. His depleted cock tried to rise but didn’t quite make it. Not yet. Perhaps not at all. He didn’t care. The stuffing of his ass had the whole of his focus. When Eddie fell forward, one dark hand braced on the mattress beside Carson’s head, the angle of his cock changed, and pleasure burst with unexpected violence up Carson’s spine. He cried out, scrabbling at the bed over his head.

“Yes?” Eddie grunted, the force of his thrust pushing Carson inches on the bed.

“Yes!” Anxious, Carson reached back with one hand, digging his fingernails into Eddie’s flank. “Don’t you *dare* stop. Fuck me. Hard.”

Eddie took him at his word, pounding into him. When the force threatened to send him over the edge of the bed, Eddie wrapped an arm around his waist to yank him back and hold him secure. Carson tried to brace himself, but Eddie went wild, putting all the strength of that body behind the fucking. Whimpering, Carson melted into the sheets. His flagging cock rubbed the mattress, sending tiny thrills to echo the lightning bolts Eddie caused with his thrusts. Drips of sweat splattered Carson's back, and Eddie's grunting underlined Carson's cries. Carson didn't even know what he was saying anymore, if he was uttering words, lost in mindless rutting.

Eddie's grunts grew more fervent; his rhythm faltered. If possible, his thrusts got harder. With a cry, he froze, then thrust, thrust, and thrust again.

Hot and sated, Carson lay underneath Eddie, aware that the bigger man was braced over him, breath laboring. Carson didn't move, only smiled and waited, enjoying feel and sound. Eddie kept his hips braced against Carson, allowing his softening cock to remain inside. But when he finally moved, he twisted and lowered himself to Carson's blind side. His hand slid over Carson's back, soothing. The hand drifted over Carson's butt, callused fingers tracing the crack. Soft lips kissed the back of Carson's shoulder, beard tickling. "You okay?"

"Mmmm." Moving as little of himself as possible, Carson flopped his head to the other side to face Eddie. Eddie laughed softly as he helped to clear Carson's face of tangled red hair. Once he could see Eddie again, he gave him an overlarge grin and a sleepy smile.

"Will you stay with me tonight?" Eddie asked softly, his fingers now tracing the curve of Carson's jaw.

God, yes! "If you want me to."

The hand moved to rub his shoulder. "I'd like that."

"Okay." He snuggled closer.

Eddie stayed with him a moment, then kissed his shoulder, muttered something about bathroom, and left the bed.

Carson watched him go, letting his mind drift. He knew there were things he should be thinking of, but none of that seemed important tonight. Tonight he'd just enjoy the moment.

Besides, he thought with a giggle, feeling his cock begin to perk up, I think Eddie's got more in him.

Chapter Nine

Carson wore the red silk blouse on purpose. The garment was designed for a woman and looked it, complete with a loose bow that tied at the bottom of the V-neck collar intended to show off cleavage. He kept himself from wearing his silicone breast enhancers, but the line of the V still showed plenty of skin. Three-quarter sleeves ended in a ruffle, with ribbons dangling from his elbows. It was cute and feminine, and combined with loose, freshly dyed crimson hair and artfully applied makeup, it made him look like a girl. He would have completed the outfit with a skirt but thought that might be going overboard, so he settled for stylish slacks and low-cut boots. He was overdressed, and he knew it, but this was a special occasion.

He nodded at his reflection, satisfied with the results. If Eddie was going to make him meet his mother, then she was going to see Carson for what he was. If Eddie took exception… Well, it was probably better to have it happen early in their relationship.

“If we even have a relationship,” he muttered to himself as he rummaged through his jewelry box for appropriate earrings. “We don’t, really. We’re having sex.” Except that sex with Eddie felt more real than anything Carson had ever shared with Anthony, and he’d wanted a commitment out of Anthony. “But that was different.” He selected a garnet bracelet and hooked it on. “Anthony knew the score. And Anthony,” he told the garnets, wondering how much they were worth, “had money.” Which Eddie didn’t. Not enough. Carson had tried in subtle ways to get Eddie to see that they were wrong for each other. He was high maintenance—he knew this about himself. Here he was, wondering how he was going to pay his bills,

and he couldn't bring himself to sell any of the expensive jewelry Anthony or his former boyfriends had gotten him. Eddie couldn't possibly afford him long-term.

Selecting garnet earrings and a matching necklace, he adorned himself as he left his bedroom. His boots were women's shoes, but they weren't heels. He wanted to make his point, but he didn't have to shove it in their faces.

Done with his look, he took a deep breath, pocketed his keys, and left his apartment. The short walk through the halls did nothing to calm his nerves. He wished he'd been more firm with Eddie, but he just couldn't seem to say no to the man. Not when Eddie had his heart set on something, and he'd certainly been focused on having Carson to Thanksgiving dinner. With his *mother*, of all people! Carson cursed himself for not making up some generous friend who was having him over for dinner. Not that Eddie wouldn't have caught on. If nothing else, he would have seen Carson's light on across the garden.

At Eddie's door, Carson stopped. He could hear music on the other side. Old sixties rock, if he didn't miss his guess. Not Eddie's usual fare. He preferred ear-splitting, hair-band rock from the eighties.

Carson preferred show tunes and hip-hop. See? The relationship just couldn't work.

While he was trying to figure out a valid reason for turning around and going home—or maybe going out to a bar for a few hours—the door opened. An older woman stood there, one hand on the doorknob and the other on the handle of a little dolly to which an oxygen tank was strapped. At least, Carson assumed it was oxygen, since a tube went up from it to wind about her head with a little clip at her nostrils. She was a little taller than him but stooped slightly, so they were on eye level. Iron gray hair was cut short in artful waves about her wide, smiling face. In a cozy, overlarge green sweater, jeans, and socks, she looked perfectly at home.

"You *have* to be Carson." No sarcasm or bite to her first words, just mild amusement as she stepped aside to give him room to pass. "Come in, darling."

Beyond her, Eddie peeked around the kitchen wall. He had a potato in one hand and a peeler in the other. When he saw Carson, he grinned. “You’re here.”

“Almost,” clarified his mother, still holding the door. She gave Carson a little head jerk inside.

Ah well, no help for it. Carson skittered past her. He turned as she closed the door. “Hi.” He extended a ringed hand. “I’m Carson.”

She shocked him by ignoring his hand and winding surprisingly strong arms around his neck to pull him into a hug. “I figured that out. Oh my, you *do* smell good.” She held his head with one hand while she sniffed the curve of his jaw. “Is that Chanel?”

Carson froze. “Um…”

She held him out to arm’s length, dark eyes dancing mischievously. “What? I can’t know Chanel? Or am I wrong?”

“No, you’re right. I…uh…”

She patted his cheek. “Don’t worry, darling, I’m like that. You’ll get used to it.” She smoothed her hands over his shoulders. “I *love* that blouse. Where did you get it?”

Carson glanced toward the kitchen, thankful to see Eddie still standing there. Except that Eddie was *just* standing there. Carson pleaded with his eyes for help.

Eddie stepped forward. “Mom, this is Carson—”

“We’ve covered that bit, sweetie.”

“Carson,” Eddie continued without missing a beat, “this is my mom.”

“You can call me ‘Mom’ if you want, but you’ll probably feel more comfortable calling me Maddie.” She hooked an arm with Carson’s and walked him toward the kitchen as easily as she walked her oxygen tank. “Come, let’s sit at the counter so Eddie can keep cooking and protect you at the same time. I’m dying to talk clothes with someone.”

* * *

The entire dinner proceeded in much the same fashion. Carson did finally find his voice, though, and once he did, he discovered that he and Maddie quite happily dominated the conversation. They spoke of clothing and trends, *Project Runway* and *American Idol*. She grilled him about the burlesque show, then regaled him about some musicians she used to know in college. She was great. After the first awkward moments, she made him feel like part of the family.

Which was how he got roped into riding along when Eddie packed her into the truck to take her home. They were in the midst of a heated discussion about *American Idol* season eight, and Maddie wanted to finish, so she insisted he come with. So he was trundled up in the backseat of Eddie's massive truck when they pulled through the circular driveway in front of Maddie's retirement home. It seemed like a nice enough place. Set away from the road, it had a beautiful lawn in front and was surrounded on all visible sides by trees. There was even a line of dormant rosebushes—thanks to Eddie, Carson could recognize them now, even without their blooms—along the property wall on the left. Bright fluorescents illuminated the wide glass doors that made up the entrance. Beyond the doors, several senior citizens and staff in scrubs milled about a tastefully decorated lobby. The place looked like a fancy apartment building—which, Carson realized, it actually was.

"Come out here, you," Maddie demanded as Eddie helped her out of the truck, "and let me say a proper good night."

Bossy. He grumbled to himself, but it was with a smile. She'd won him over completely. He could only hope that he'd done the same. She never had—not once—made a big deal about his feminine looks or the fact that her big, manly son had turned gay for him. She'd acknowledged their relationship in an accepting, casual manner and didn't seem to have a problem with the fact that Carson looked like a girl. Actually, she had seemed delighted to speak with someone who knew so much about what she called "girly interests."

No sooner was he standing beside her than she drew him into a hug. "It was *good* to meet you." She gave him an extra squeeze.

He hugged her back, glad Eddie was behind him so he couldn't see Carson shut his eyes to hold back tears. Just a mild threat, no imminent sobbing, but Maddie's acceptance was so amazing. He loved his mother, but Maddie was far more what he considered a traditional mom. "It was good to meet you too."

She patted his cheek as she drew away and discreetly wiped moisture from one of his eyes. "Let me talk to my friends and let you know how many tickets we need to your show."

"You don't have to—"

"Hush. It'll be a blast for the senior set to rock the burlesque show." She cackled at her own joke as she glanced through the sliding glass doors. With a smile, she waved at someone, then turned back to Carson. "I look forward to seeing you again. I *do* hope your mother calls you for Christmas." That had been a bone of contention over dinner. Maddie had not been pleased to hear that Carson wasn't even sure if he'd hear from Katherine for the holidays. She reached up to hug her son, then gave him a mild frown when he didn't accept and took hold of her oxygen dolly. "You don't need to walk me up."

"Yeah." He put a hand on the back of her shoulder. "I do." To Carson, "I'll just be a minute. You can wait in the truck. No one will bother you."

Maddie rolled her eyes. "He's such a mama's boy." With a grin and a blow of a kiss for Carson, she let her son lead her off. Carson watched, amused, as they had a brief argument just inside the door when Maddie obviously wanted to stay in the lobby to talk to someone but Eddie steered her toward the elevators.

Carson climbed back into the truck to wait. Through the glass doors, he watched various senior citizens wandering by, some in wheelchairs, some with walkers, most moving through on their own accord. They all seemed relatively happy, shattering all that he'd thought an assisted-living apartment complex was. He'd thought they were dark, depressing places that were little more than hospitals

where people went to die. Maddie had assured him that there were plenty of places like that, but hers was not one of them. They'd done lots of research when finding her place and had been joyous to find such a good one so close to the apartment building where Eddie would still be living. She lamented being able to live with Eddie and help him run the apartment complex that they jointly owned, but she acknowledged that her emphysema was too much for Eddie to handle. Besides, she assured Carson that she had plenty of friends, so it wasn't at all bad.

Carson set his forehead against the rim of the window and closed his eyes. Eddie had made him eat far too much, dumping food on his plate without even asking. Carson had tried to protest, but between Eddie and Maddie, they'd made him eat a lot. Eddie, he knew, thought he didn't eat enough anyway and tried to get him to shovel down food any chance he got. It was endearing, but Carson had to bring it to a stop. If he was going to move on with his life, either with the show or not, he had to look his best.

In fact, he really should bring a lot of things to a stop. But it was so *nice* having someone care for him. It was what he wanted. He just felt so guilty when that person wasn't someone with the excess money or resources to handle it.

With that thought in mind, he must have dozed a bit, because he jumped when the driver's door opened and Eddie hopped up. "Sorry I took so long."

"No." Carson stretched. "That's all right."

"Were you sleeping?"

"Maybe a little."

"Good." Eddie turned into the street. "You need some rest."

"Yeah." Carson bumped the headrest with the back of his skull and closed his eyes for a brief moment. "It's going to be a busy few weeks."

Eddie said nothing. Carson peeked at him as he pulled the truck out of the drive and clearly saw the disapproving scowl. "I saw that."

"What?"

“That scowl.”

“I’m not scowling.”

Carson yawned and stretched again. Man! The food really had gotten to him. It was the first full-course meal he’d had in ages. “Sure you’re not.”

Eddie let it go for a count of twenty, then snorted. “You don’t get enough sleep as it is. Now you’re going to get even *less*.”

Carson watched the lighted buildings flash by. “It can’t be helped. I need the money.” Carson had signed on to work the crowd at the Glousen for the holiday season. Starting the day after Thanksgiving, he was on host duty from midnight, when the show ended, to three a.m., when the club closed. He hadn’t told Eddie about the “extra duties” he was encouraged to perform if asked by a patron, because he had no intention of being asked. He’d play host and laugh and drink, but he wasn’t going to have sex with anyone. His debacle with Anthony had soured him toward the men who frequented the show. When he did move on to find someone to support him, it’d be away from the show or anything like it. Of course, before he did that, he’d have to figure out what to do with Eddie. But that wasn’t something he had to think about just yet. He just needed to get through the holiday season. That’s all.

Still, Eddie didn’t like that he’d be working until three a.m. He seemed to forget that Carson had regularly stayed out that late or later when he was with Anthony. “If it’s the rent that you’re worried about—”

Carson’s eyes flew open. “Stop right there. Don’t go on.”

Eddie frowned and just kept talking. “I can cover you. I *own* the building.”

“No. Absolutely not.”

“Why not?”

He was wide-awake now, arms crossed over his belly as he glared at the passing cars. “I am *not* going to allow you to pay my rent.”

“But if you need—”

"No. It's bad enough you feed me all the time. It's bad enough that you've started driving me all over the place." He passed a palm over his face with a sigh, careful not to smudge his makeup. "I shouldn't let you do any of that."

"I don't mind."

"I know you don't. But you've got tons of stuff you need to be doing. You don't need to coddle to a selfish little—" He stopped, not exactly sure what he was going to call himself. He suspected that "whore" was the idea of it. Isn't that what you called a person who got paid for sex? Carson had asked himself a million times why it was different with Eddie. He'd never had a problem taking help or gifts when offered before. But with Eddie, he felt…*responsible* somehow. It didn't feel right taking from Eddie, because he actually cared about Eddie. He didn't want to take too much and leave Eddie hurting. And he wouldn't let himself investigate that feeling much further, either.

"Carson—"

"No. End of discussion. I mean it, Eddie."

The big man took him at his word, and they didn't speak for the rest of the short drive home.

After they left the truck in its parking space and entered the building, Carson faced Eddie in the hallway. "Good night."

Eddie frowned as Carson slid his arms around Eddie's neck. "You won't come back to my place?"

Carson cradled the back of his head, trying to draw him down for a kiss. "No."

Eddie resisted. "Why not?"

"I'm tired, thanks to eating more food than I've seen all year." He tried to make light, laughing softly. "Besides, I need some sleep."

"You can sleep at my place."

"Doubt it. No way I can lie down next to this body and not want to play with it." It was true. He knew Eddie liked to cuddle and was entirely serious about

letting Carson sleep, but since they'd started having sex, Carson wasn't content to cuddle until he was exhausted from a good fuck. Tonight? No, he had to get some sleep. Or so he told himself.

Eddie let himself be kissed, but Carson could practically hear the gears in his head whirling. Big hands roamed Carson's back, then slipped down to cup his butt. Carson squeaked when Eddie abruptly hauled him close, crushing them together. "Come sleep with me," Eddie murmured against Carson's lips.

Carson moaned, adoring the squeeze of Eddie's fingers in the meat of his ass. "Can't." He licked Eddie's bottom lip. "Not tonight."

"I'll let you sleep. Promise."

Carson laughed. "Yeah, but I might not let you keep that promise."

Eddie recaptured his lips, plunging his tongue into Carson's mouth. Carson had to give him full credit for learning to kiss properly. At least learning to kiss Carson properly. He knew what to do with lips and tongue now, enough to drive Carson wild. He'd learned what to do with his hands too. And his cock. That beautiful, thick cock that was even now pressing into Carson's cock. When Eddie wanted something, it was hard as hell to get him to change his mind.

A door opened down the hall, and laughter preceded voices. Carson drew out of Eddie's embrace, and the big man let him. As the people down the hall made their good-byes to their family, Carson flattened a palm in the center of Eddie's chest, holding him at bay. "Thank you for dinner. I'll try and talk to you tomorrow."

The heat in Eddie's eyes told him that Eddie didn't wish to wait for tomorrow. But Carson felt the need to hold firm on this. Much as he'd love to let Eddie wrap him up and shelter him from the world, Carson had to do what he had to do to stand on his own two feet. Even if he hated it.

With great effort, he put his back to Eddie and walked away. He smiled nicely at the people down the hall as he passed them. He overheard holiday music behind any number of doors as he passed them on the way to his quiet apartment. Once in his own darkened bedroom, he fell forward on hands and knees on his unmade bed.

Quickly he loosened his pants and yanked both them and the panties he'd worn down his thighs, exposing his leaking cock. He fell to his side and desperately took himself in hand, pulling his erection. Cursing himself for not at least allowing a quickie with Eddie, he wet two fingers with saliva, then reached back to fill his anus. He wanted to be with Eddie. He wanted the other man to cover him, to penetrate him, to take him. But he *would not* take any more advantage of Eddie than he already was. Even if he assuaged his guilt by thinking that sex was the "payment" for what Eddie did for him, nothing made up for the niggling thought that he'd made Eddie gay. Thoughts a jumble, he strained with himself, pumping his hips between the actions of his two hands, yearning and grunting and moaning Eddie's name when he finally came.

Afterward, he lay on his bed in a heap, staring at the curtains that darkened his window and wondering how he'd managed to make such a jangled mess of his life.

Chapter Ten

Carson stifled a yawn behind one hand as he slipped through the darkened doorway just behind the bar. Behind him, the Glousen floor was filled with Friday-night partiers. Before him, some of the more amorous were making out in the hallway that led to both the restrooms and the stairs to the offices. Weaving through various bodies, Carson made it to the stairs, then up. All the office doors were locked, but that wasn't what he'd come for. He just needed a relatively quiet spot to check his phone for messages or e-mails. He was hoping that Katherine would respond to his SOS e-mail soon. He didn't ask for help often, since she'd told him she might not be able to get Gerard to help him. But he was desperate. He needed a reprieve to get through the holidays, and he was determined not to ask Eddie for help.

His overskirt rustled as he leaned against the wall. In the dim light of the hallway, the russet satin looked almost black, giving it a goth look that he rather liked. It was completely open in the front, exposing tight black shorts that hugged him from hip to midthigh and left nothing to the imagination. When Carson was working the floor, Thodd didn't want anyone to think they were hitting on a girl and getting a boy. The fishnet stockings and club-heeled Mary Jane's added to the look. His tight black midriff top exposed his belly and all of his arms to his wrists, where abundant jelly and rhinestone bracelets took over.

Brushing loose hair from his face, he held his phone up and punched keys to bring up his e-mail. Yes! There was one from Katherine. Short: *How lovely to hear from you, sweetie. We'll be in New York for Christmas, as it turns out. I'll ask Gerard if we can get you a ticket to come out. I'd love to see you. K.* Breathing a sigh, Carson

shut down the e-mail. It was as good as he'd hoped. If Katherine could get him out of town, if even for a few days, he might be able to get his head on straight. And maybe, just maybe, she could get Gerard to take pity on him and loan him some money to get through a month or two. He hated to ask, but it wasn't like Gerard didn't have Franklins oozing from his pores. Carson had to get out of this show and get a new job. He knew that. It was just a matter of how.

He tucked his phone into a convenient little hidden spot in the ruffled waistband of his skirt, then brushed a hand through his hair, preparing to rejoin the crowd below. Two weeks of working the Glousen after shows, and already he hated it. Strange, since working the crowd wasn't much different than when he went to parties when he was single. It was the same routine of picking out a man for the night and monopolizing his time. Except it was more of a drain when you had no intention of going home with them. Harder to keep them interested when you weren't going to give them the prize at the end of the night.

Taking a deep breath, he turned. Then stopped. At the end of the hall, right at the top of the stairs, was Anthony. Lounging in the empty doorway, he had his shoulder against the frame, arms and ankles crossed. Dressed in the snug white slacks that he preferred and a shiny black or dark blue shirt that was open at least to his crossed arms, he looked positively edible. Tall and slim, he nonetheless showed muscle at exposed chest and forearms, not to mention toned thighs and a narrow, tapered waist. Jet-black hair was cut short at the sides and back but left long and straight at the top and front, allowing it to fall in a sexy wave over his left eye. Oh, those eyes. Bright blue, very similar to Carson's own, and such a startling light underneath his hair and brows. Pale skin was unseasonably tanned to bring out the eyes even more. He grinned, that gorgeous curl of half his lips that always reminded Carson of the wonders he was capable of with those lips. "Hey, Red."

Carson flattened a palm on the wall beside him, needing the support. "Hey."

Anthony's gaze raked him up and down, a palpable caress that made Carson's cock burn just a little. "You're looking good."

“Thank you.” He did some raking of his own, seeing no reason why not. He knew every curve and cranny of Anthony’s body. “You too.”

One shoulder shrugged as Anthony let his arms drop. Thumbs hooked in the belt that the tight pants didn’t need. “I’m surprised to see you working the floor.”

“Really?” Carson propped a hand on his hip. “I gotta pay the bills somehow.” Then, before Anthony could say more: “How was Martinique?”

Anthony nodded, like he’d known Carson would bring it up. “You heard.”

“You made sure I would.”

Anthony’s smile didn’t deny it. “It was great. You’d have loved it.”

Carson let himself snarl. “You bastard.”

He shrugged. “I told you you’d miss me.”

“I don’t miss a damn thing about you.”

Eyes fixed on Carson’s face, Anthony pushed off the door frame. “That’s a lie, and we both know it.” He sauntered down the hall, and it was impossible for Carson to avoid him in the narrow space. He considered backing up, but that would just put him against a wall, and that seemed far more vulnerable. Anthony stopped right in front of him, reaching up. Carson caught his wrist just before it touched his face, and they stood there, hands between them, staring into each other’s eyes. Anthony’s smile softened. “Come on, Red, you left me. What did you expect?”

“From you?” Carson pushed the hand aside. “Nothing more than what I got.”

“You got a lot from me, lover.”

“I did. And I gave a lot too.”

It was Anthony’s turn to raise a brow. “Oh? When was that?”

“Fuck you.” Despite Anthony’s size, Carson tried to shove him aside.

Ignoring the shove, Anthony used the movement to wrap an arm around Carson’s neck and pull him close. Chest to chest, Carson drowned in the heat and expensive scent of the man. “Don’t be like that.” Anthony nuzzled behind Carson’s ear. “I was just kidding. I missed you.”

“Let me go.”

“Not a chance.” His other hand slid down Carson’s back, finding and cupping his bottom through Carson’s ruffled overskirt. “I’ve been dreaming about your body.”

Not falling for it, Carson pulled his arms between them, the better to shove at Anthony’s chest. “Bullshit. What about the boy toy you took to Martinique?”

Teeth nipped the top shell of his ear. “I can’t even remember his name.”

“You asshole.” With all his strength, he pushed. When Anthony didn’t give, he kept pushing and wiggling, now desperate to get out of the embrace.

“Okay, okay.” The larger man finally gave, unwinding his arms and stepping back. “Jesus, what’s got into you?”

“Two months of trying to figure out how to pay my bills because I’d been letting you pay for me *way* too long.” Finally free, he stomped toward the stairs. “Now, excuse me. I have to go earn a living.”

“Hey, Red, come on. Would you wait?” Anthony caught his arm when they were halfway down the narrow staircase. “Let’s make up. I’ll take you out to eat, and you can spend the night at my place.”

Carson snatched his arm free. “Fuck you.”

Anthony caught his jaw with one hand, tilting his head up. “That too.”

Their lips met before Carson could avoid it. One of many things Anthony did well was kiss. He took possession of Carson’s mouth, tongue plunging past his teeth as the firm hold on his jaw kept his head at the proper angle. A step below Anthony, Carson was overwhelmed by the size of the other man and could barely keep his balance as Anthony bent over him. He was completely out of breath and shaking when Anthony finally relinquished his mouth.

“Come on, Red,” Anthony murmured, breath warm against Carson’s lips. “You know you want to.” Long fingers stroked back into his hair. “I’ll take you home, fuck you senseless. Then we’ll figure out how to fix the mess you’re in.”

Despite his resolve, Carson melted. It would be so easy. Anthony wanted him back. Clearly. Sure, their relationship wouldn't—couldn't—be the same, because he now knew Anthony would drop him in a hot second and didn't see their relationship in the same light as he did, but maybe that was a good thing. The important thing was that Anthony was capable of taking care of him, and Anthony knew the score.

Unlike Eddie.

Like cold water was dashed over his head, Carson's mind cleared and his budding ardor cooled. He yanked away from Anthony and stumbled backward down a few stairs, out of reach. "No. You stay away from me."

He turned his back on Anthony's look of disbelief and plunged back into the crowded club.

Because he wasn't watching where he was going, a hand grabbing his arm took him off guard. He spun and toppled right into the lap of the man who had grabbed him. With a yelp, he righted himself, bumping the table to knock down a few drinks. The other patrons at the table just laughed it off as the man who'd grabbed Carson wound an arm around him. "Hey, pretty boy. Where you off to so fast?"

Carson kept his palm spread on the man's chest as he faced him. Carl, that was his name. He'd been propositioning Carson for a week now. Middle-aged, well dressed. A little on the plain side, but he had a nice laugh and pretty eyes. Although the eyes at the moment were a tad bloodshot from drinking and likely an illegal substance or two.

He slid his free hand down Carson's cheek, admiring Carson's face. "God, you're beautiful."

Summoning a smile, Carson tried to push to his feet. "Thank you." Unsuccessful. Carl held him tight.

"Hold on a minute. I want to ask you something."

Thodd appeared in Carson's peripheral vision. Watching. Grand.

Carson settled. "What did you want to ask me, sugar?"

"Now that's more like it." The free hand slipped down his neck to lazily caress his chest, landing on the bare skin below the midriff. "I was wondering if you'd go home with me."

Carson laughed softly. "Now, Carl, you asked me that before."

"And you said you had someone to go home to." Fingers toyed with the hem at his midriff. "But I saw Anthony with someone else, and Peter here tells me you two aren't an item anymore."

"I never said it was Anthony."

"Here." The fingers left Carson's belly to delve into the inside pocket of Carl's jacket. He pulled out a twinkling rope of gemstones.

Carson couldn't help it. His eyes widened, and he'd almost grabbed the bracelet before he stopped himself. Carl laughed and draped the pretty thing over Carson's upraised hand.

"Does this change your mind?"

Carson stared at it as Carl leaned in to nuzzle his ear. It was *so* pretty. Unless he missed his guess, the gemstones were real diamonds, sparkling like nothing else. Rubies and emeralds were woven into the slim strand as well, making a glittery, expensive Christmas bauble.

Teeth bit gently into his ear, just above his earring. "There's more where that came from, baby. Just come home with me."

So easy. He'd had countless propositions since he'd started working the floor. Few others came with such an expensive lure, but the men who offered for him all knew what they were getting themselves into. Seeing Anthony must have triggered something, because Carson *really* wanted to take this particular offer. He didn't know much about Carl, but he was a semiregular and had worked his way through most of the other pretty boys in the cast.

As Carson was thinking, Carl worked his way to Carson's mouth and, using two fingers to twist his head into the right position, covered his lips in a possessive kiss.

The whimper that came out of Carson's throat was pathetic, nothing like the sexy kitten he knew he could be. He jerked out of the kiss and slammed his hand and the bracelet on the table, upsetting drinks again. "No." Stunned, Carl wasn't prepared when Carson leaped from his lap. Carson heard the man's protest but didn't care. He kept running.

He didn't make it to the exit. Almost there, yet another hand grabbed his arm. This time, he whirled around to see Thodd. An angry Thodd. The bigger man hauled him through the exit but headed down a hallway that took them to a backstage door. Once through, he practically shoved Carson into a wall.

"What the *fuck* is your problem?"

Back pressed to the wall, Carson glared at the bigger man with all the courage he had left. "I don't have a problem."

"The hell you don't. How dare you treat a patron like that?"

"He'll find someone else."

"But that's not your job here, is it? Your job on the floor is to entice customers, not insult them."

"I didn't—"

"I don't care. What are you here for anymore anyway? Without Anthony, what do you really want here? You're not a dancer; you're not an actor. You can't be happy."

Carson sneered in a last-ditch effort to still tears. "Fuck you."

Thodd crossed his arms, shaking his head. "You should just leave. Don't come back."

"You're firing me?"

"Yeah. I am. Get your stuff, and get the hell out."

Carson stayed pushed against the wall as Thodd turned and left from the door they'd come through. Once the director was gone, Carson slid to a heap on the floor. Tears poured from his eyes.

Moments later, the door opened again. Before he could react, there was a rustle of crinolines, and then a comforting scent of orchids surrounded him with Chelsea's arms. "Shhhh." She stroked his hair, tucking his head under her chin. "I saw what happened with Carl, then Thodd. Oh, sweetheart."

Helpless, Carson wound his arms around his friend and let her comfort him.

Chapter Eleven

Eddie had assured him that the roses weren't dead; they were just in a sort of winter hibernation. Still, Carson missed the blooms as he sat on the stone bench in Eddie's garden. He remembered the first time he'd come here, the first time he'd really spoken to Eddie. Probably the day that changed his life, maybe for the better. Maybe not. Or maybe it was the morning with the rose. Yes, it was the morning with the rose. How could he not react to such a sweet gesture from such a giving man?

He was going to miss him.

Shortly after the sun crested the roof, Carson heard Eddie's boots on the path leading to the bench. He appeared seconds later, dressed for work in T-shirt and jeans. No ball cap. He'd stopped wearing them so much. He'd also started to let his hair grow out. It was still short, but there were enough dark curls to cover his scalp. Concern on his face, he headed straight for the bench and sat at Carson's side. "What are you doing up so early?" He took Carson's hand, holding it on his thigh. "Are you okay?"

Carson smiled sadly, squeezing Eddie's fingers. "I'm okay. I haven't gone to sleep yet."

"Why not? You should have called me."

"Maybe." Carson turned his face toward the sun, soaking up what little heat penetrated the chill winter air. "I wanted to see the sun rise. Well, at least watch it rise over the roof."

Eddie glanced toward the sun, then returned his attention to Carson. "What's wrong? Did something happen at work?"

"Yes."

"What?"

How to do this? Easy one first. "I got an e-mail from Katherine. She's going to see if she can get Gerard to fly me out to see her in New York for Christmas."

Carson could see the relief in Eddie's smile. "That's terrific." He reached up to gently brush some hair from Carson's face, his calluses a soft scratch on Carson's skin. "I'll miss you. But I'm glad you'll see your mom. It's been a while, yeah?"

"Yeah. I wouldn't have e-mailed her at all, but seeing your mom at Thanksgiving…" He shrugged. "I have you to thank for that."

Eddie leaned in, and Carson tipped his face up to accept a soft kiss. He wanted more. He wanted so much more. But he kept it brief.

"There's more," he said, turning his head.

Eddie watched as Carson slipped his hand from his. "Okay."

"Anthony stopped by the theater last night."

Silence for a heartbeat. "Oh."

Carson nodded, tucking his fingers under his thighs and leaning forward, staring at the path instead of the man beside him. "He looked great." Nothing. "He wants me back."

Another silence. Then Eddie turned to face the same way as Carson, their shoulders almost—but not quite—touching. "What did you say to him?"

"I told him to go to hell. Basically." Before Eddie could digest that, he continued. "But it made me think. I can't keep taking advantage of you."

"You're not taking—"

"Stop. You say I'm not taking advantage, but we both know I am. You feed me; you drive me places. And you've got plenty on your own to do. And then you offered to let me slide on the rent." He shook his head, tumbling a few locks of hair loose from behind his ear. He left them as a flimsy shield that kept him from seeing Eddie's face. "The worst part is, I want to let you do it. I want to let you do *more*."

"I can—"

"No. I don't fit in your life, Eddie. I *shouldn't*."

"Carson, I love you."

Carson shut his eyes tight, fighting the surge of warmth at the sound of those words. So simple, so gruff, so obviously heartfelt. "Eddie, don't."

"No. I love you. You can't be saying these things."

"Eddie, you can't do this to me. I do nothing for you."

"That's not true. You make my world bright. Just like my roses."

That just about tore out Carson's heart. He stared at the paving stones through watery eyes, forcing breath over the huge lump in his throat. God, did he wish he could accept what Eddie was saying. But he saw the future. Today, Eddie would pay for stuff. Carson might even be good and get a job. Then he'd get tired of it and slack off. Then Eddie would be taking care of more. And soon enough, Eddie would start to hate it. Eddie couldn't afford him. Eddie *shouldn't* afford him. So, when Eddie's hand connected with his shoulder, he shot to his feet and out of arm's reach. "No."

"Carson, please—"

"No, Eddie, it isn't right. You deserve *so* much better than me. All I do is use boyfriends for what they can do for me. I've never supported myself. Ever. I'm just like my mother." He met Eddie's tortured gaze and forced himself to keep talking. "When Anthony offered to take me back, I *wanted* to do it. I did. I still *do*." He didn't even mention being tempted by Carl. "It would be so easy with him. I don't feel guilty taking anything from him."

Eddie shook his head, imploring. "I'll give you anything you want. I have plenty of money saved up. It's yours. Please, don't do this."

Stumbling back a step, two, Carson covered his eyes with one hand. "Jesus, Eddie, do you hear yourself? That's just not right. Besides"—he dropped his hand

and gave Eddie as cold a look as he could manage through watery eyes—"you can't *afford* me. I'm a high-class whore, baby."

Anger beetled Eddie's brows as he stood. "Don't say that about yourself."

It forced Carson back a few more steps. "Why not? It's true." Tears dribbled down his cheeks, but he ignored them. He hurt something awful, like his guts were being wrenched from his body, but things were better this way. "You need to forget about me."

"That's impossible."

"I'm sorry. I'm really, *really* sorry. The last thing I ever wanted to do was hurt you. You're a nice guy, Eddie, a *great* guy. You…" His voice gave out on a squeak, and he had to swallow to get it back. "You can do so much better than me."

With that, he turned tail and ran. Up the path, through the door, down the hall, and into his apartment. He locked and latched the door, then leaned against it, crying. He wouldn't look out the sliding glass doors. He didn't want to know if Eddie was still sitting there. He just needed it to be over.

Chapter Twelve

Chelsea turned out to be his savior. She mentioned that having a roommate would help her out. Her apartment was very small, and they'd have to share a bed, but since she wasn't seeing anyone and he wasn't sexually interested in what she had to offer, it would be fine. It might be a bit cozy for a few months until Carson figured out what he was going to do, but they were good enough friends that they should make it.

"Besides," she pointed out when she almost had him talked into it, "we're the same size. I'd get access to all your great clothes."

He'd stayed the night with her before and went to her after the painful breakup with Eddie. They'd concocted the plan together. She coaxed her brother Larry to bring his truck to help Carson move his things from his apartment. It took a little over two hours. Sad, really, that the only things that needed to be packed and moved were clothing and jewelry. The latter was already kind of packed in boxes, and the former they mainly pulled from the closet and laid on blankets that covered the bed of Larry's truck. He had no relationship to any of the furniture except perhaps the bed, and since Anthony had bought that for him, in the end he didn't mind leaving it behind. When he got to the magazines under his suitcase with the pressed roses in them, he got a little choked up, but he managed to hold it together as he put them at the bottom of the case and piled clothing on top of them. At least he'd have a keepsake.

He waited to talk to Eddie until everything was in Larry's truck. By the look on Eddie's face when Carson showed up at his door, he'd seen what was happening.

"You're leaving."

"Yes. I lost my job last night, so I—"

"What?" Eddie started forward but hesitated when Carson took a hasty step back. "Don't go. Let me help you."

"No. You've done enough for me already. Too much."

There was a little frustrated growl, then a soft sigh. Carson was torn between wanting Eddie to stay where he was, or reach for him and demand he stay. Best the latter didn't happen, but a big part of him wanted it to. "When will I see you again?"

Carson swallowed. Stared at Eddie's chest. Shook his head. He could make out Eddie's face in his peripheral vision but couldn't meet his eyes.

"Don't do this." Eddie's voice was gruff and clearly uncomfortable. He stood in the doorway, one thick arm braced on the door frame over his head. A lock of hair fell over the worry lines on his forehead. "You don't have to leave."

Valiantly holding back tears, Carson pushed a check into Eddie's hands and stepped back. "It's not all of the rent, but I'll have the rest soon."

"I won't take that."

"Please. I don't want to owe you anything."

"You don't."

God. Was he making the biggest mistake of his life, or was he really keeping Eddie from making the biggest mistake of his? He peeked at Eddie's eyes but had to avert his gaze, unable to see that concern without breaking down. "I-I have to…go."

That was it. He left Eddie standing there and left the building. In the truck, he watched the front door, both hoping and dreading that Eddie would follow. He didn't. No histrionics. Not Eddie. Damn practical man was going to take him at his word. Just more proof that they didn't think alike enough to be together.

Or so he told himself.

"He seems like a nice guy," Chelsea offered quietly when she was seated between him and Larry in the front seat of the truck.

Carson watched the apartment building disappear as Larry turned the corner. “He *is* a nice guy. He doesn’t deserve someone like me taking advantage of him.”

* * *

Katherine came through not only with money to see him through the month but also with a round-trip ticket to New York to spend the holiday with her. He was relieved of imposing on Chelsea during the family-oriented time of year.

As time with his mother went, it was very pleasant. Gerard wasn’t around much—one of the reasons he’d paid for Carson to keep her company—so mother and son got to do things together like they had when Carson was a teenager. But better because now there was a bottomless credit card to fund it. Mostly they shopped. It was, after all, their favorite pastime. Carson had new clothes, jewelry, and shoes. For the first three days, Katherine had caught him up on the multitude of things in her life and completely spoiled him. Even Gerard had been welcoming, which, while very nice, threw Carson completely off. So far, Katherine had completely avoided the troubles that had prompted him to call for help. But two days before Christmas, when they were seated with two steaming cups of coffee at a little table in a swanky coffee shop in Manhattan, resting between shopping stops, she finally asked about his love life. Silly him, he told her.

“A janitor?” Both perfectly etched eyebrows arched toward her hairline as she carefully set down her cappuccino.

“No.” Carson set down his own mocha. “The superintendent of the building. The *owner*, actually.”

“Oh.” One brow descended, but the other remained arched thoughtfully. “What size is the building?”

“I don’t know. Twenty units?” How sad—he’d lived there, and he hadn’t a clue how many units were in the building.

“That’s not very large. What part of town?”

Barely managing not to roll his eyes, Carson picked up his cup for another sip. “Nowhere you’d approve of.”

“Carson.”

“Sorry.”

She reached over the little table to pat his wrist. “I’m just looking out for you, baby.”

Really? Where were you when Anthony dumped me? Where have you been the last two months? But even as the thoughts crossed his mind, he knew they weren’t fair. She hadn’t known about his split with Anthony, because he hadn’t called to tell her about it. She hadn’t known about Eddie, because he hadn’t told her about that either. If he had, she would not only have given advice, but she probably would have managed to send him some money. But he’d wanted to get by on his own, although now it was hard to remember why. “I know.”

“So where is this…Eddie, did you say his name was?”

“Yes, that’s his name. And I imagine he’s gone back to his normal life.”

“You haven’t seen him?”

“Not since I moved out.” He missed him something awful, but that was to be expected. Behind him. Eddie was behind him. He had to remember that.

She nodded, reaching up to smooth a lock of hair back behind her ear. Diamonds flashed at her earlobes. “That is probably for the best, don’t you think?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Don’t pout, dear.”

“I’m not pouting.”

Finely manicured fingers reached over to stroke the curls around his ear. “I miss your hair.” The dyed red was gone, replaced by the silver blond left behind by bleach. He’d had Chelsea do it before he came to New York and also let her cut his hair, shearing it just above his shoulders. He thought she’d done a decent job for a nonprofessional. After seeing it, Katherine had insisted he go to her stylist to “fix”

it. The color wasn't a match for his own, but it'd look more natural as it grew back in, and he had to admit the new soft curls shaped his face nicely. He was still getting used to the shorter locks falling into his face, but after long judgment in the mirror, he knew it looked good.

He gave her an impish grin. "You should have seen it when it was red."

"No, thank you. I'm still cross with you for doing that in the first place. You had such *lovely* long hair." She hid a smile by raising her cup to her lips. "Although I'm sure you were stunning."

"I take after you."

She blew a kiss to him over the rim of her cup. Katherine was undeniably beautiful. Barely in her forties, she could easily pass for early thirties. Honey blonde hair kept long and silky, currently bound up into a classy chignon at the nape of her long neck. She had passed her softly rounded features to her son, as well as her sultry blue eyes. If she'd wanted, she could have auditioned for any number of shows and probably gotten a part. But she seemed happy with Gerard. Genuinely happy for the first time in Carson's lifetime that he could recall. After seeing them together, Carson had to admit that they might actually be in love. In their own self-serving ways, they fit. She liked to spend his money, and he liked to let her. She'd proven adept at keeping his house orderly, and she was marvelous eye candy for any and all social events. Carson had never quite seen his mother as a socialite, but she'd turned into a rather good one.

He thought of Maddie and her raucous good humor and humble needs. Her loud voice and easygoing nature. So very different from Katherine, but both women touched a place in his heart. He supposed it was the "mom" thing.

"So what are you going to do now? Are you going to stay with acting?"

"I doubt it." He sipped thoughtfully. "It was fun for a while, but it's not really right for me."

"I think you should move on. You're not going to meet a good man where you are."

He smiled. "It's not all about meeting a good man."

"It most certainly is." She sighed. "It's too bad that things didn't work out between you and Anthony. That relationship seemed so promising." *Promising*. Promising for him to have a man who could keep him in the manner to which he'd become accustomed.

Tracing the rim of his cup with one finger, Carson debated his next words but eventually just said them. "Anthony wants me back."

They had the predicted effect. Katherine drew up in her seat, excitement sparking in her eyes. "What's this? You didn't tell me that."

No. He'd been trying not to think about it. "I don't think I want to go back to him."

"Why ever not?"

"I don't think I love him."

Katherine sighed. "Oh, sweetheart. Don't do that. What have I *always* told you about relationships?"

"Mother…"

"Love is nice, but it can't be the basis of a good relationship."

He frowned. "The entire world disagrees with you."

"That's not true. *Real* people understand that a relationship is based on an understanding and an acceptance of what makes a person what he or she is, both you and the other person." She picked up her purse and rummaged in one of the pockets. "You know who you are and what you are, sweetheart." She pulled out a compact and flipped it open. "You know what you need to make you happy, and you know that your needs are expensive. There is nothing wrong with holding out for a man who can provide for you." She carefully applied powder to her brow and cheeks as she spoke. "It sounds like your Anthony could provide for you."

Your Anthony. "He could, yes."

"You were together for six months. You must get along. Did he hurt you?"

"No."

"Why did you split up?"

"He didn't want a monogamous relationship. He wanted to still see other people."

She snapped the compact closed and set her focus on him. "And does that matter so much?"

He stared at her. He'd heard her take on relationships his entire life. He'd lived it himself. But something inside him, some small part of him, had never agreed with her. "Yes."

"Oh, sweetheart." She had firm opinions on that, as well. Having been "the other woman" a number of times in her life, Katherine didn't view sexual infidelity as so much of an issue. She believed that if he was still willing to support you and he was discreet and healthy about it, a man could do what he liked. Carson wondered if his mother even enjoyed sex, or if she just saw it as another tool in her arsenal.

"It doesn't matter. We're not together." Shaking his head, he finished his mocha, then sat back in his chair. "Maybe I should try supporting myself for a change."

Katherine eyed him for a moment, then used exaggerated care to return her compact to her purse. "Why would you do that?"

"Thank you for your vote of confidence, Mother. I *am* a capable adult." Wasn't he? He thought of Eddie not only taking care of himself and his ailing mother, but also a building full of people. And he still managed to care for a beautiful rose garden. Now *there* was a capable adult.

"Do you propose to get a *real job*?" Katherine said the last two words with emphasis.

"Yes."

"Doing?"

“I don’t know.”

“The jobs you are likely to get won’t buy you all the pretty things you love, Carson.”

“I know that.”

“And I can’t promise to always have the funds to send to you.”

He breathed in, held it, then let it out slowly. “Gerard’s only in the giving mood for the season?”

Her lips pressed together briefly. “You should count yourself lucky that he’s in the giving mood at all.”

Again, unfair of him. He had no right to anything of Gerard’s. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“You should be.” She finished with her purse and set it aside on the table. “But you make my point for me. You shouldn’t rely on Gerard to fund your life. You should find your own man and live your *own* life.” She reached over to trace his jaw. “You need someone, Carson. You’re better, happier, with someone there to take care of you. Someone like Anthony.” Her hand dropped to squeeze his wrist again. “Someone who can take care of you.”

Carson stared at the faded red silk rose that stood in a vase in the middle of their table. Roses. *I think I already have found someone. But he’s not the right guy.*

Chapter Thirteen

"Happy New Year, gorgeous!"

Carson stumbled a little under the weight of the man who bumped into him. He was about Carson's size, so he didn't bowl him over, but since Carson was in three-inch heels and a fitted skirt, he was at a slight disadvantage. But he managed to right both himself and his attacker while even managing to avoid the hand groping at his ass.

"Happy New Year, Simon."

Bleary eyes blinked at him as wet lips puckered in his direction. "Give us a kiss."

Maintaining his smile, Carson pressed his lips oh so briefly to Simon's. He did, after all, like the man, even it wasn't in the same way as Simon liked him. Or seemed to like him. Funny, whenever Carson was dressed like a man, Simon tended to stay away. But since Carson wore a chic shimmery teal dress that slimmed over his padded hips and plunged in front to expose a pretty nice cleavage—silicone breast enhancers were a wonderful thing—Simon was all over him.

Simon yanked Carson full flush against his chest, a hand at the small of Carson's back. He reeked of expensive scotch and faded cologne. "You look good as a blond."

"Thank you." Tossing loose curls from his face, Carson kept his palms spread on Simon's shoulders and his head held back. "Good thing that's my natural color."

"Is it?" A leer curled Simon's lip as his hand slid down to cup Carson's ass. "Let's get a peek downstairs, huh?"

No amount of subtle squirming loosened Simon's grip. "Wouldn't do you any good. All shaved."

What the hell had he said *that* for? Now the light blared in Simon's eyes. "Oh yeah?"

"Simon…"

"Hey." Anthony's voice was a welcome beacon behind Carson. "McClennan, you're groping my date." The words were said with a smile, but Anthony's hands were firm as they pried Carson away.

Laughing, Simon stumbled back a step. He held up his hands, palms outward. "No foul, no harm." He grinned up at Anthony. "Can you blame me?"

With one arm, Anthony curled Carson in against his side. "Not at all."

Relieved, Carson slid his arms around Anthony's waist and tucked his head up under the taller man's chin. All around them, well-dressed drunken revelers wished each other New Year cheer, and not a few were locked at the lip still, even though it was a half hour past midnight.

"Here." Anthony offered Carson a fresh champagne flute as Simon stumbled away.

Carson took it and melted a step away from Anthony, surveying the crowd. The private party was held in the lobby of a hotel nestled in the hills. This room opened through a sliding glass door to a rustic swimming pool landscape. A wall of windows overlooked a lush wooded embankment that sloped to a populated valley and had provided an excellent view of distant fireworks. Champagne was provided via a tinkling fountain at the corner of the open bar, and a good number of wealthy elite mingled in the subdued lighting underneath gold and silver helium balloons. It was exactly the type of party that anyone who wanted to be someone would die to attend. Exactly the type of party Carson loved.

Used to love. Or had he ever really seen behind the glitz?

Carson did his best to look like he was having fun, when really he was empty. A little over a week with Katherine had convinced him to patch things up with Anthony. It had only taken one phone call before he left to get Anthony to send a driver to pick him up at the airport. Much to Carson's surprise, Anthony himself had shown up and manhandled both of Carson's two large suitcases. He hadn't argued—much—when Carson declined staying with him, preferring to go back to Chelsea's. He'd taken it well, in fact. The invitation to the New Year's party had come on the drive from the airport, and Anthony had sweetened the pot by telling Carson that he'd opened a line of credit at one of Carson's favorite boutiques so Carson could buy the proper outfit. When Carson had told Katherine about it, she'd almost squealed with delight. Chelsea had been beside herself when she'd come with Carson to help him shop. Both were full of praise for how generous Anthony was. Now he was here, and Anthony had been a wonderful date all night—solicitous, charming, and attentive. At least, when he was around. But he didn't even disappear as much as he usually did at parties. As icing on the cake, he looked positively edible in a black silk suit. Carson should be in heaven.

He wasn't. It all seemed very superficial.

Lips pressed to the back of his neck startled him, but warm hands on his shoulders kept him where he was. A turn of his head, and he met Anthony's bright blue gaze. Smiling, Anthony cupped Carson's chin with one finger and tilted his head the better to kiss him. Kissing. Once Carson had enjoyed kissing Anthony. Now he kept wondering how many others Anthony had kissed tonight. *It doesn't matter*, a voice that sounded a lot like Katherine's said in his head. *He's with you. He bought you a lovely outfit. He's staying with you in a hotel room. For all intents and purposes, he's yours.*

For now, offered an inner voice that sounded more like his.

Anthony drew back, and Carson reached up to thumb lipstick from his mouth, amazed that there'd been enough left on his mouth to smudge on Anthony's. Or maybe it wasn't his. *Doesn't matter.*

"Let's go to the room."

Anthony's low voice should have sent delightful shivers down Carson's spine. Instead, he felt panic. To hide his reaction, he lowered his gaze and faced forward. "So soon? Don't you have more schmoozing to do?"

"Not tonight." Firm hands slid down Carson's sides to rest on his waist. "No one's in any shape to remember what they're saying anyway." Again lips caressed Carson's neck. "I'd rather be alone with you."

Right. He'd known it was coming. He'd managed not to have sex with Anthony since he'd come back from New York, even though he'd seen the man twice since the airport. When they'd arrived at the hotel earlier, Anthony's business contacts had provided Carson a reprieve from preparty nookie. But now there was no excuse. Now he'd be expected to have sex with Anthony. Why not? They were getting back together. Weren't they? He'd indicated as much to Anthony. And Anthony had clearly paid for the privilege.

One hand slipped forward to span his belly, pulling him back against Anthony's chest. Warmth enveloped him. "Come on."

With no excuses, Carson could only follow as Anthony pulled away, took his hand, and led him from the room. *Damn*. He downed the rest of his champagne so he could set the flute down on a table just inside the door to the hall. *I didn't drink enough*. Anthony waved and traded brief greetings with a few men on the way to the elevators, but he didn't stop. Carson smiled at the knowing looks the men gave him and put up with the drunken leers. That's what you got when you were eye candy. At this point, the homophobes might not even care that he was a guy.

The elevator opened, and another couple came inside with them, so Anthony contented himself by drawing Carson into a hug. He smelled of champagne and cigars and—yes, Carson pushed his nose into Anthony's collar just to be sure—perfume. Not Carson's perfume. That was easily explained, of course. Anthony was well known here and would have been on the receiving end of any number of hugs from a number of women. Carson didn't have to think about the forty-five minutes

earlier tonight when he'd been talking to a few women he knew from other parties. Carson had noted Anthony's absence but hadn't said anything about it. He could have been smoking with friends; he could have gotten caught in a business discussion. Carson didn't have to think that he was taking a quickie with some slut—male or female, didn't matter which—in a dark corner or a bathroom stall. He didn't have to think it…but he did.

They left the elevator before the other couple, and Anthony led Carson by the hand down the hall to their room at the end. He swung Carson inside and barely had the entry light on before he had Carson in his arms, his tongue plunging between Carson's teeth. If Carson didn't respond with gusto, he at least yielded. It was easy. He knew all of Anthony's moods. He recognized the level of drunkenness and knew they were in for a frenzied fuck first, followed by a more leisurely exploration after the edge was gone.

"Missed you," Anthony murmured as he walked Carson back to the bed.

"Missed you too," Carson made himself say. It wasn't entirely a lie. Before Anthony could tumble him onto the mattress, he pushed at the taller man's shoulders. "Hold on. I need to get out of the gaff."

Anthony grumbled but smiled. He kissed Carson again, possessive and ferocious, then let him go. "Hurry."

Eyes averted, Carson smiled. "I'll try."

The bathroom was as big as the bedroom he shared with Chelsea, with a sunken bathtub and a tiny vanity area. It didn't take Carson all that long to remove the shaper that gave him hips and the gaff that kept his cock and balls tucked securely away, but he lingered just the same. He took the time to brush out his hair and remove his makeup, trying to tell himself that he was getting ready for sex and not stalling to avoid it.

When Anthony called, "Did you drown?" Carson knew he'd taken too long.

He stared at himself in the mirror. Blond curls framed the face he'd known most of his life, the face that allowed him to pass for a woman more often than not.

He glanced down his narrow shoulders and slim torso to the cock that made him a man. The cock that had no interest whatsoever in Anthony's plans for the night. Frustrated, Carson gripped the edge of the counter. "You can do this," he muttered to himself. With that, he left the bathroom, naked as the day he was born.

Anthony lay on the bed, propped up by ample pillows in the middle of the mattress. He'd turned on the light in the corner of the room so that one shoulder was in light and one was in shadow. A glass of whiskey balanced on the knee he had bent up. The other sprawled to the side, making his nudity as evident as the erection that showed Carson he was wanted.

"Hey, beautiful." Anthony held out one hand, inviting Carson closer, while he turned and set his glass on the nightstand with the other. Carson crawled over the sheets toward him, summoning a smile. Anthony's hand curled around the back of his neck and drew him into a kiss. He rolled Carson onto his back in the pillows and settled on his side, smoothing a hand down Carson's chest, belly, hip… His fingers and palm cupped Carson's soft shaft and balls, squeezing in a way that should have had it growing. Carson was relieved when he felt a little something, a little length to fill Anthony's hand. After a few minutes, Anthony kissed his way down from neck to nipples to belly. Carson still wasn't really hard when Anthony's lips grazed at the tip of his cock. *What's wrong with you*? Looks aside, he was a fucking *guy*. A young one, at that. He shouldn't have any trouble getting hard. But although it felt good when Anthony enveloped all of his cock in the wet heat of his mouth, Carson could tell that it wasn't going to happen. He didn't want to do this. He didn't want Anthony inside him. Everything Anthony did to get closer to that conclusion filled Carson with more panic, which did nothing for the state of his cock.

After a good tongue bath that produced very little results, Anthony pushed up onto his arms. He was probably giving Carson a look, but Carson couldn't see it with his hands clasped over his eyes.

"What's wrong with you?"

Carson swallowed. “Nothing.” *Shit*. All at once, he sat up and twisted away. “Everything.” Before Anthony could react, he had his legs over the side of the mattress. “I can’t do this.”

“What the fuck?”

Carson stood. “I can’t do this.”

Anthony caught his arm and tumbled him back onto the mattress. “What are you talking about?”

Carson shook his head. “I can’t do this.”

“What?”

“Us. This. I don’t want you.” Belatedly, Carson realized he might have said that badly.

Anthony scowled. “What *the fuck* are you talking about?” Carson tried to squirm away, but Anthony kept him pinned with hands at his shoulders and straddled his thighs for good measure. “Tell me what you’re talking about.”

“I don’t love you.”

“Okay.” Anthony paused, then sat back on his heels, still straddling Carson. “What’s that got to do with anything?”

“It’s everything.” Unable to get free, Carson pushed up onto his elbows and locked gazes with Anthony.

Anthony frowned. “What’s gotten into you?”

“I met someone.”

“In New York?”

“No. November. Let me up.”

“No.” Using all his weight, one hand spread on Carson’s sternum, Anthony pushed Carson onto his back. “Who?”

“What does it matter? You don’t know him.”

“I don’t?”

"No."

It didn't look like Anthony believed him. "Then why'd you come here with me?"

Carson sighed, going limp. "We broke up."

"So what's the problem?"

"I…love him." It was true. It was the reason Carson didn't want to take advantage of Eddie, the reason he didn't want Eddie to have to suffer with him. He loved Eddie and cared more about the other man's happiness than his own. Something that had never bothered him with Anthony.

"Jesus." In one move, Anthony lifted one leg and twisted to take himself off the bed. "You're a fucking piece of work."

Carson remained on the bed, watching Anthony gather his clothing and put it all back on except for the jacket. Carson felt he should say something, but since he couldn't figure out what to say, he stayed silent. He got the distinct impression that he was getting off easily. Not a word was spoken until Anthony stood at the dresser adjusting his open collar. With one glance at Carson, he picked up his wallet from where it lay beside him and extracted a few bills. He held them up so Carson could see them in the mirror, then dropped them on the polished wood. "This is for a cab." He checked his watch before he put the wallet in his pocket. "I'll give you an hour. You need to be gone when I get back."

Back up on his elbows, Carson realized Anthony was waiting for acknowledgement. He nodded.

Without another word, Anthony was out the door.

Carson fell back into the pillows and clawed at his face, suppressing a scream. What the hell was *wrong* with him?

Chapter Fourteen

Three of Eddie's rosebushes grew along the driveway that led to the gated parking lot. Carson had never really noticed them before, but as he sat on the cement steps in front of the apartment building, he stared at them. He wondered why the single red rose he held had bloomed when the bushes hadn't. Was the bud from somewhere else? He'd heard that flowers got shipped in, but where did they come from? If southern California wasn't hot enough for roses this time of year, where was? True, it was February, and it had been raining lately, but still—California? He should have asked the nice man at the florist's. Maybe he could wow Eddie with his knowledge.

Yeah, right.

The questions rolled in his mind, keeping him busy while he waited. It kept him from chickening out and leaving. It was kind of cheeky for him to be here on Valentine's Day, of all days. What if Eddie wasn't here because he was on a date? Sure, it was only six o'clock, but maybe they'd made an early day of it. They. He and she? He and he? Had Eddie come to his senses, gotten past his gay urges, and found a good woman? Or had he accepted the new side of himself and let Maddie find him a good man. *No*! Carson didn't want to think about that. Didn't do him any good. He'd find out soon enough.

Then a familiar truck turned the corner and came toward the building. Carson was watching, and the angle was right, so he could see when Eddie noticed him sitting on the stoop. The truck slowed, and Eddie's frown of confusion was understandable. Carson would be confused too.

But, most important, he was alone. Judging from the large cardboard box in back, someone in the building was getting a new dishwasher. Eddie had been out buying a dishwasher? On Valentine's Day? How…Eddie.

Carson kept his seat while Eddie turned in to the driveway. The big truck came to a stop just in front of the gate to the parking lot, and Eddie got out to come toward him.

"Can I help you?" Eddie asked once he was in hearing range.

Carson had to smile a little. Eddie didn't recognize him. But that was understandable, wasn't it? Without the long red hair, makeup, and frilly clothing, he hardly looked like himself. His black overcoat could hardly be called feminine and pretty much hid him from neck to knee even if it was open in front.

But before he could figure out what to say, Eddie came closer, and recognition dawned. Dark eyes got wide, and he lifted one hand to push up the bill of his Dodgers cap. Now a little longer than Carson's, his hair curled around his ears, smoothing directly into his neatly trimmed beard and mustache. "Carson?"

That was his cue to stand. He did so, clutching the long-stemmed rose in one hand and dusting off his butt with the other. "Hi, Eddie."

"Wow." They were now just beyond arm's length apart. Eddie looked no different as he studied Carson up and down. Same cap, same jeans, same T-shirt, even if he wore it under a battered green-and-black-checked flannel shirt. "You look great." He smiled, the corners of his eyes crinkling. "Different."

Carson looked down at himself, laughing softly. "Yeah." He ran his hand through his hair. "I, um…I thought I'd come by and see…" He noticed the flower in his hand. "Oh." He held it toward Eddie. "This is for you." He blushed at the sight of Eddie's surprise. "I know. Your roses are much better but…I, uh…" Damn, he wasn't normally tongue-tied. He'd rehearsed what he'd say any number of ways, leaving room for improvisation, but all of his words deserted him when he actually stood in front of the man. All he wanted to do was throw himself into Eddie's arms and beg forgiveness. But Eddie deserved better than a raving lunatic.

Eyes locked on Carson's, Eddie took the flower. He didn't glance at it, not even as he brought it to his nose. Behind the stem, his smile warmed. "Thank you." After taking a good sniff, he lowered the flower and gestured with it toward the front door. "You want to come inside?"

"No. Uh, that is, yes. But… Guh." He took a deep breath, slapping the outsides of his thighs. "I want to take you out to dinner. A proper date. On me. That is, if you don't have plans."

"Dinner?"

"Yes. I want to take *you* out." Before Eddie could respond, Carson forged on. "I got a job. It's not a great job, just a receptionist, but it's for a clothing buyer, so I may be able to move up in a while. My boss is really great, and she thinks I've got a good eye, so maybe…" He stopped himself, bit his lip as he dropped his gaze to Eddie's boots. "And, well, yeah. I was hoping I could take you out to dinner. It doesn't have to be tonight or anything. Valentine's Day. Not if you have a date."

Eddie chuckled. "I don't have a date." He passed by Carson to the front door and quickly unlocked it. Holding the door, he stepped aside. "Meet me at my door? I gotta park the truck."

"Oh." Carson couldn't suppress his glee, shown by his teeth-baring grin. "Great." He passed by Eddie, inhaling the scent of good, healthy sweat underneath dust and a faint trace of oil. Ridiculous that it turned him on more than expensive cologne these days. He turned to watch Eddie through the glass door, admiring his sure walk and broad back. Oh yes, Carson had missed him even more than he'd realized.

It probably only took Eddie a few minutes to park the truck and appear through the back door, but to Carson it seemed like hours. He leaned against the wall just outside Eddie's place, arms crossed over his chest. His wallet burned a hole in his pocket, filled with cash that he hoped would be enough for a nice dinner. He had a few ideas where to go, and they were all out of his price range, but he'd saved up all last month for this.

Eddie smiled at him, still holding the rose as he unlocked his door. Carson was keenly aware that they hadn't yet touched, and knew it was a good thing. He felt like a firecracker ready to go off, and Eddie's touch was the spark. When Eddie stepped aside, Carson slid past him into the familiar front room. Beyond the glass door grew the rosebushes he'd missed. The room was in slight disarray, more tools out of their boxes than normal. Also, a good three feet of the counter by the sink was covered with dishes. The clutter was odd, out of place. Eddie passed by him, brushing his shoulder before entering the kitchen. Without a word, he pulled down a delicate slim crystal vase and filled it with water. The vase and flower he took to the dining table and, after brushing aside mail and magazines, set it in the center. Still recovering from the brush of his shoulder, Carson just watched. His blood simmered when Eddie, gazing at the rose, smiled.

It got hotter when Eddie turned that gaze on him. "You look good," he said, reaching up to remove his cap.

"Thanks. I…" No, this wasn't about him. Carson swallowed, watching fingers comb through Eddie's hair. "You too."

Eddie shook his head, dropping the cap on the table as he came toward Carson. "No. You're the pretty one."

Although every cell in his body ached for the embrace he saw coming, Carson held up his palms, fending Eddie off. "Eddie, wait. Dinner."

Eddie closed the distance between them, stopping only when Carson's palms came in contact with his chest. His heart thumped steady and heavy as he covered Carson's hands with his own. "We don't have to go to dinner."

Carson recognized the intensity of the look Eddie gave him under half-closed eyelids. His cock stirred in response. "W-we should go to dinner. I want to…treat you."

One of Eddie's hands rose to caress the side of Carson's jaw. "Just you being here is a treat."

Instinct tilted his head into Eddie's touch. The calluses on the pads of his fingers felt so achingly familiar. "But… You should be mad at me."

"I should?"

Carson nodded, aware he was rubbing up against Eddie's palm. "Yes. I was horrible to you. I…left you."

"You had your reasons."

"Yes, but…" Unable to help himself, he kissed Eddie's palm.

"Tell you what." Fingers dug farther, sinking into Carson's hair to cup the back of his head. "You can make it up to me."

Carson tried to frown at Eddie as the bigger man drew him close. "You're making this too easy for me."

Eddie smiled. "I'm happy you're here."

Carson sighed, trying to keep up his token fight as Eddie's strength surrounded him. "You're hopeless. Here I wanted to show you how much I—"

His words fell away as Eddie's mouth closed on his. Carson whimpered, delighted by the soft scratch of mustache on his skin. The hands he had spread on Eddie's chest slipped up and around the man's neck, allowing him to press close to all that rugged strength. How could he want anyone else?

"Eddie," he sighed when breath became imperative. Tilting his head back, he made room for Eddie to bend and taste his throat. One strong hand gripped his ass, lifting him onto his toes as the other hand cradled the back of his neck, holding him securely. "Eddie, I'm so sorry. I missed you. So much."

Eddie grumbled a reply that might have been "Missed you too," but his lips and tongue were busy mapping the sensitive area beneath Carson's ear. Big hands unwrapped Carson's arms so they could get Carson's coat off. Once the expensive garment was pooled on the carpet, Carson jumped into Eddie's arms, lifting his legs to wrap them around Eddie's waist. The bigger man held him easily with just one bounced hitch to adjust his hold. Then Carson was carried toward the bedroom.

"What about"—he kissed Eddie's cheek—"dinner?"

"Later." Eddie lowered Carson to the mattress, immediately covering him and reclaiming his lips.

A part of Carson wanted to protest, but that part was fighting a losing battle. The rest of him was perfectly in sync with Eddie as the larger man ran his hands down Carson's sides. The hem of his sweater bunched up to his armpits, and callused fingers ran over his torso, leading Eddie's lips to his nipples. "God, Eddie." As he pulled the sweater the rest of the way off, Eddie made a meal of him, or rather an appetizer of his nipples, nibbling and sampling like a fine diner. "You're really not—ah!—mad at me?"

Teeth dug into his skin right above the nipple, just enough to hurt a little. Then dark eyes glanced up at him. "Not right now." His words were muffled because they were said against Carson's skin, but Carson heard them fine. Eddie kissed his way down Carson's ribs.

"You should be." He closed his eyes as Eddie pulled at the button of his slacks. "I would be."

A nose nudged his erection through his briefs. "I'll remember that."

Carson groaned as Eddie pulled down slacks and briefs. "You'd never be as stupid as I was."

Eddie didn't bother to answer that. He left Carson's clothing just below his knees and descended on his cock, swiping his tongue up the shaft before sucking the tip inside his mouth.

Carson hissed, curling forward and around Eddie's head. He fought to move his legs, but Eddie's weight and his own clothing impeded him. "Oh, man. Oh, God. Eddie." He shoved his fingers into Eddie's hair, holding on for dear life as Eddie swallowed him down. Moaning, desperate, he grappled with Eddie's shirt, pulling it up his back until he could scratch at bare skin. "Eddie. Eddie, wait." The other man growled a refusal, his head bobbing over Carson's crotch. They'd made love enough

for Carson to recognize Eddie on a mission. He was going to make Carson come, and there was nothing Carson could do about it.

Except come.

“Fuck!” He fell back into the pillows, clutching at the solid wood headboard above him and arching as best he could with his legs hobbled. It didn’t last long. He’d not been with anyone since he’d last been with Eddie, and his body wasn’t used to three months of abstinence. He came on a cry, and Eddie swallowed most of it down, although Carson did feel a telltale trickle down the inside of his thigh.

Grinning like a loon, Eddie knelt up, then pushed off the foot of the bed. As Carson watched him dreamily, he pulled off Carson’s shoes and properly removed the pants and briefs. Then he left Carson sprawled on the bed while he stripped off his own clothing.

“Why me?” Carson asked once Eddie was naked, spectacularly erect, and rummaging in the nightstand for condom and lube.

“What?”

“Why would you put up with me?”

Eddie chuckled softly, dropping the lube on the mattress as he ripped open the condom. “I love you.”

Carson groaned, an undeniable warmth stealing through him just under the surface of his skin. “Why?”

Eddie knelt on the bed. Cupping Carson’s jaw with one palm, he lowered his face until they could touch noses. “You make me happy.”

Carson bit his lip over a sudden threat of tears. With the simplest of statements, Eddie never failed to cut through the bullshit and tell it like it was. Carson caught his wrist and turned a kiss into his palm. “You make me happy too.”

Eddie leaned into him, crawling over to straddle his thighs and then maneuver his way in between them. Carson opened willingly, angling his hips as Eddie opened

the bottle of lube and poured a generous amount on his palm. “Do you need…?” Eddie wiggled his fingers in the general direction of Carson’s crotch.

Carson smiled. In their short time together, Eddie was still a beginner at some things. “No. No fingers.” He caught his own knees and drew them up toward his shoulders. “Just you.”

Grinning, Eddie greased his sheathed cock, then watched as he aimed it. Carson closed his eyes, wanting to fully enjoy the press of Eddie’s cock at his entrance, the bite of the stretch, then the slow, easy back and forth as Eddie worked his way inside. God, yes! This was what he’d missed. Sex with Eddie wasn’t slick and practiced. It was real. Once Eddie was inside him, Carson released his knees and gripped Eddie’s shoulders, moving with his lover as they found a rhythm. Then it was all about Eddie thrusting in, claiming Carson for his own as he worked toward his orgasm. Through slitted eyes, Carson watched Eddie’s face, noted the sweat breaking out on his forehead that plastered locks of hair to his skin. Noted the fall of his jaw and heard the labor of his breathing. Because he could, Carson raked his fingers through the hair that covered Eddie’s chest, pinching the nipples within because he knew Eddie loved it. When Eddie came, it was the most beautiful thing Carson had ever seen, a pure, unadulterated release of pleasure.

When Eddie settled atop him, remembering how to breathe, Carson held him close, cheek to Eddie’s forehead. “I love you too,” he whispered, needing Eddie to hear the words. “So much.”

Eddie’s arms squeezed him. “You’re like a rose.”

Carson frowned, not sure he understood the murmured words. “What?”

Eddie pushed up onto one elbow so he could look at Carson. “You’re like a rose.” A fingertip traced Carson’s jaw. “Bright and beautiful.”

Carson laughed. “Maybe when you met me. But now…?”

Eddie tapped his nose with the fingertip. “A rose is a rose.” He inhaled. “Smells just as sweet.”

Eyes wide, Carson dropped his jaw. “Are you quoting Shakespeare at me?”

Eddie flushed and ducked his head, laying his cheek on Carson's shoulder. "Maybe."

Laughing, Carson wound his arms around Eddie's neck and held him close. "Oh, man. I love you so much." He felt Eddie's jolt of surprise but didn't let go. "I promise to do everything I can to deserve you."

Eddie had no words to respond to that, but the kiss he brought to Carson's mouth said it all.

THE END

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Jet Mykles

As far back as junior high, Jet used to write sex stories for friends involving their favorite pop icons of the time. To this day, she hasn't stopped writing sex, although her knowledge on the subject has vastly improved.

An ardent fan of fantasy and science fiction sagas, Jet prefers to live in a world of imagination where dragons are real, elves are commonplace, vampires are just people with special diets and lycanthropes live next door. In her own mind, she's the spunky heroine who gets the best of everyone and always attracts the lean, muscular lads. She aids this fantasy with visuals created through her other obsession: 3D graphic art. In this area, as in writing, Jet's self-taught and thoroughly entranced, and now regularly uses this art to illustrate her stories or her stories to expand upon her art.